

**PREACHING FIRST CENTURY PARABLES
TO 21ST CENTURY LISTENERS**

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter identifies the need to equip preachers with the procedure of contemporizing the parables and preludes a seminar designed to address this need.

The Identification of the Problem

It has been said of the saxophone, “It is an instrument that is easy to play poorly.”¹ In this same vein, the parables of Jesus are easy to preach poorly. Preaching a parable is a novice preacher’s dream but often an experienced preacher’s nightmare.² In his article “Listening to the Parables of Jesus” philosopher-theologian Paul Ricoeur talks about the challenge of preaching the parables.

To preach today on the Parables of Jesus looks like a lost cause. Have we not already heard these stories at Sunday School? Are they not childish stories, unworthy of our claims to scientific knowledge...? Are not the situations which they evoke typical of a rural existence which our urban civilization has made nearly ununderstandable? And the symbols, which in the old days awakened the imagination of simple-minded people, have not these symbols become dead metaphors, as dead as the leg of the chair? More than that, is not the wearing out of these images, borrowed from the agricultural life, the most convincing proof of the general erosion of Christian symbols in our modern culture?³

Preachers struggle with preaching the parables in such a way that impacts their audiences with the same force that Jesus had upon His audiences. How could these simple, direct, stories Jesus told pose problems⁴ for the preacher?

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, Poet & Peasant Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980), xx.

² Thomas O.Long, *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 87.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Listening to the Parables of Jesus*, Criterion 13, no. 3 (Spring 1974), 18.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee and Stuart Douglas, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 149.

It is the nature of the parables that causes our great dilemma in preaching them. In some ways to interpret a parable is to destroy what it was originally.⁵ Roman Catholic scholar Barbara Reid says one should not have to interpret a parable any more than one wants to have to explain a joke. One simply “gets it,” because one understands the punch line.⁶ However, she also recognizes that in a fallen world, separated by miles and centuries from Jesus’ original milieu, we may not always “get it.”⁷ Why is this the case?

According to Fee and Stuart, in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*:

“The hermeneutical task posed by the parables is unique. It has to do with the fact that when they were originally spoken, they seldom needed interpretation. They had immediacy for the hearers, inasmuch as part of the effect of many of them was their ability to “catch” the hearer. Yet when they come to us in written form and in need of interpretation precisely because we lack the immediate understanding of the points of reference of the original hearers.”⁸

What, then, do we do?

The Importance of this Study

Haddon Robinson has said, “The Bible always says what it meant to say to the 1st Century audience.”⁹ However, the 21st century audience may not always get what the bible has said. For this reason Reid believes “we need to be prepared both to explain and to contemporize the parables.”¹⁰ Even if the preacher does not contemporize the entire sermon it will be helpful to include some modern equivalent to the biblical story in an introduction, in one or more illustrations interspersed within the body, or in a conclusion

⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁶ Barbara Reid, *Parables for Preachers* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999), 18.

⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 22.

⁸ Fee and Stuart, 160.

⁹ Haddon Robinson from PR1011. Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. South Hamilton: 2004.

¹⁰ Blomberg, 22.

to the message. These contemporizations work to recreate the original dynamic, force, or effect of Jesus' original story.¹¹ Hence, in order for the modern preacher to accurately communicate the timeless truths of the Lukan parables the preacher should communicate the principles in a contemporary context.

This thesis-project will modernize three Lukan parables. This should equip the twenty-first century preacher with the skills to effectively communicate the ancient parables and enhance the hearers' capacity to better understand and apply the principles in their lives.

The Purpose of the Chapters

Effective expository sermons communicate the timeless truths of the ancient parables to the modern listener. This thesis-project will proceed in the following manner:

- Chapter II will review the necessity of defining and interpreting the parables in their cultural and theological context.
- Chapter III will review the literary nature of the parables and guidelines that the 21st Century preacher might follow in order to interpret and effectively preach them.
- Chapter IV will include the steps for the 21st Century preacher to translate the 1st Century parable into a 21st Century context. Here, the parable points of reference for the original hearer will be identified so that the preacher can create new points of reference for the contemporary hearer to understand the parables timeless principle.
- Chapter V will:

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

- (1) Provide three contemporary stories based on three Lukan parables as examples of how the parable might sound today,
- (2) Present three parabolic expository sermons,
- (3) Present a seminar of how three Lukan parables can be modernized for a contemporary audience without changing the timeless truths to the pastors and ministers of the Wolverine State Baptist Convention and Saginaw Valley District Association. Further, the case study will show that all of the Lukan parables can be modernized into a 21st Century context.

Conclusion

No texts are richer than the parables. They are inviting, they bear powerfully and often beautifully the very core of the gospel. They are also, as a rule, highly complex and resistant to easy explanation. The preacher may decide what one of them “means,” but a closer look reveals other possible meanings---while yet further reflection discloses something larger and more elusive. No preaching is more daunting or more demanding than the parables.¹² Therefore, the goal of this thesis-project is to encourage and equip preachers with the skills to preach the universal and timeless principles of the parables and translate the Lukan parables in today’s context without changing the timeless truths. This should enhance their capacity to hear, ponder, and preach the parables to their audience that they respond, as did the first audience.

¹² Paul Duke, *The Parables* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 15.

CHAPTER II

PARABLE IN CULTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

This chapter addresses the crucial need to define and interpret the parables in their cultural and theological context.

Definition of Parable

To name a thing is to know a thing, or so it seems. Yet we name many things we cannot precisely define. Such is the case with parables both now and in ancient times.¹³ In the study of the parables, one must note that not all the sayings we label as parables are of the same kind. There is a basic difference, for example, between the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35), (true parable) on the one hand and the Yeast in the Dough (Luke 13:18,19), (similitude) on the other, and both of these differ from the saying, “You are the salt of the earth” (Luke 14:34,35), (metaphor), or, “Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?” (Luke 6:43-45), (epigram). Yet all of these can be found from time to time in discussions of the parables.¹⁴ (A categorization of the parables will be explained more fully in Chapter 3 under the section, “Characteristics of the Parables).

The word *methal*, which was translated *parbole* in Greek, was used for a whole range of figures of speech in the riddle/puzzle/parable category, not just for the story variety called “parables” in English.¹⁵

Jeremias, the twentieth century’s most influential interpreter of the parables stated,

¹³ Bernard B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 7.

¹⁴ Gordon D.Fee and Stuart Douglas, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 151.

¹⁵ Ibid.

“This word (parable) may mean in the common speech of post-biblical Judaism, without resorting to a formal classification, figurative forms of speech of every kind: parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person, example, theme, argument, apology, refutation, jest.”¹⁶

The best clues as to what the parables are is to be found in their function. Kenneth Bailey, in *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, says, “the parables of Jesus are a concrete/dramatic form of theological language that presses the listener to respond. They reveal the nature of the kingdom of God and/or indicate how a child of the kingdom should act.”¹⁷ Additionally, T. W. Manson says,

A parable is a picture in words of some piece of human experience, actual or imagined. As such it is a work of art. Further, this picture portrays either an ethical type for our admiration or reprobation, or some principle of the rule of God in the world, or it does both things at once...In actual working, then, every true parable is a call to a better life and a deeper trust in God, which things are but the Godward and manward sides of a true religion, the obverse and reverse of the one medal.¹⁸

Parables, like television commercials, are spoken to get people to do something. Fee and Stuart states the parable itself is the message. It is told to address and capture the hearers, to bring them up short about their own actions, or to cause them to respond in some way to Jesus and his ministry.¹⁹

With a working definition of parables in the New Testament and a description of how they function, we must then ask how they are to be interpreted. What follows are some common methods that have been used to interpret parables that have fallen short in addressing the cultural and theological setting of the parables.

¹⁶ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 20.

¹⁷ Bailey, xi. He also provides six different types of formats in which the parables of Jesus function. They are: (1) The parable in a theological dialogue, (2) The parable in a narrative event, (3) The parable in a miracle story, (4) The parable in a topical collection, (5) The parable in a poem, (6) The parable standing alone.

¹⁸ T.W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), 80f.

¹⁹ Fee and Stuart., 152.

The History of the Interpretation of the Parables

According to Larsen, the history of interpretation shows us grievous and egregious errors in interpretation.²⁰ The sign, “All kinds of twisting and turning done here,” hung outside a wood-working shop, would not be inappropriate with respect to the work of some biblical interpreters.²¹ Grant Osborne observes that parables …are “the most written about yet hermeneutically abused portions of Scripture.”²²

The reason for the long history of misinterpretation of the parables can be traced back to something Jesus himself said, as recorded in Mark 4:10-12 (and parallels, Matthew 13:10-13; Luke 8:9-10):

¹⁰When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables¹² so that,

“they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” (4:10-12 NIV)

When asked about the purpose of the parables, he seems to have suggested that they contained mysteries for those on the inside, while they hardened those on the outside. He then proceeded to “interpret” the parable of the sower in, what Fee and Stuart called, a “semi-allegorical” way, which began the endless allegorical interpretations.

Thus Augustine offers the following interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan:

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho = Adam
Jerusalem = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell
Jericho = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam’s mortality*

²⁰ David Larsen, *Telling The Old, Old Story* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, Inc., 1995), 83.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Grant L. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 235.

robbers = the devil and his angels
stripped him = of his immortality
beat him = by persuading him to sin
leaving him half dead = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually;
therefore he is half dead
the priest and Levite = the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament
the Samaritan = is said to mean Guardian; therefore Christ himself is meant
bandaged his wounds = binding the restraint of sin
oil = comfort of good hope
wine = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
donkey ("beast") = the flesh of Christ's incarnation
inn = the church
the next day = after the Resurrection
two silver coins = promise of this life and the life to come
innkeeper = Paul²³

Augustine's elaborate allegorization of the parable allowed the powerful truth of the parable to slip away in the complex welter of far-fetched interpretation.²⁴ As Bailey comments on the inadequacy of allegorizing, as well as indigenizing, universalizing and existentializing, all the parables, "we are grateful to Julicher for having discredited the exegetical method which allows the introduction of nearly anything into virtually any parable."²⁵ Greidanus agrees, it [allegorization] "fails to bring across the plain meaning of a passage in its historical context and thus falsifies the message."²⁶

A second type of approach to misinterpreting the parables is to "indigenize" the cultural elements of the parables. Bailey says, in this case, the exegete assumes that first century people thought much like himself.²⁷ He provides an example of the fallacy of indigenization:

²³ Fee and Stuart, 150.

²⁴ Larsen, 150.

²⁵ Bailey, 28.

²⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher And the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 160.

²⁷ Bailey, 28.

“Plummer, for example, notes that the father in the story of the Prodigal Son turns and addresses the servants immediately after hearing his son’s confession. Plummer affirms that of course this order must have been given after the two had returned to the house because no servant would run out and down the road. He is apparently thinking of a nineteenth-century British butler, and does not realize that a Middle Eastern listener would naturally assume the servants had followed the father down the road. Unconsciously Plummer has read his own cultural pattern back into the parable.”²⁸

The next method, Bailey mentions, is to “universalize” the cultural elements. In this case the exegete assumes that all men are basically alike.²⁹ This is the ‘one-size-fits-all or common cure for cold’ approach. In all cultures, goes the argument, the basic human relationships displayed in the parables are similar, and so a study of Palestinian culture is not really so important after all.³⁰ To “universalize” in practice becomes to “indigenize.” The one who says, “All men think alike,” really means, “All men think like me.”³¹

The fourth method is to existentialize. According to Bailey, this, in reality, shifts the discussion from exegesis to hermeneutics. The hermeneutical question is, of course, very important, but the historical question of “what it meant” must be answered prior to a hermeneutical concern for “what it means.”³² Without the historical question, he argues, the language event becomes a creation of the exegete.³³

Other alternatives are to not interpret the parables. Bailey says there are two reasons for this reaction. They are “time and distance.” We are twenty centuries away

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

from the peasant world of Palestine in the days of Jesus. We live in the West and Jesus and his audience were Easterners.³⁴ Between the biblical and modern worlds, there is a chasm.³⁵ Fred Craddock depicts the chasm as “the geographical, linguistic, psychological, cosmological and chronological gulf between the ancient Near East and modern America.”³⁶ The problem continues. Roy Zuck lists six gaps: a time gap, space gap, the customs gap, a language gap, a writing gap, and a spiritual gap.³⁷ Warren adds five more gaps: institutions, values, beliefs, attitude, and behavior.³⁸ Greidanus summarized these as the historical-cultural gap³⁹, which can be divided into three levels of discontinuities: progressive revelation, stages of kingdom history, and cultural changes.⁴⁰ They set apart two different worldviews: the Easterners world and the Westerners.

The Western exegete must move “over” and “back.”⁴¹ Bultmann has admitted frankly that it is impossible to recover what the parable of the Unjust Steward originally meant.⁴² In the sixteenth century Tomas de Vio Cajetan held the same position.⁴³ We are

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Seahawk Lun, “After God’s Heart: A Seminar To Equip Pastors With The Process Of Theological Principalization,” (D.Min. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2007), 10.

³⁶ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 117.

³⁷ Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1991), 15-18.

³⁸ Timothy S. Warren, (notes from DM455 Preaching Topical Expository Sermons, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, Winter, 2007).

³⁹ Greidanus, 158.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 167-69.

⁴¹ Bailey, 29.

⁴² R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1963), 199.

⁴³ See Bailey, *Poetry and Peasant*, 29. He says quote is from his Evang. Cum commen ...Thomas de Vio Cajetani in quattuor Evan. et Apostol. ...Commentarii, etc. (1530). Quoted by Trench, Notes, 324.

told the information is too scanty, so the argument goes; the path back too narrow. The original meaning of the parables in their Palestinian setting is irrecoverably lost.⁴⁴

The parables confront the preacher with interpretative problems. These challenges are often viewed as obstacles to powerful, relevant, and accurate interpretations of the parables. Thus, for some preachers preaching them is about as exciting as watching paint dry.⁴⁵ However, as Buttrick says, preaching parables is an excitement you [preachers] shouldn't want to miss.⁴⁶ Preachers need to deal with these challenges in order to recapture the force and even the fun of preaching the parables. What then is to be done?

The Importance of the Cultural Context of the Parable

To address the significance of understanding the cultural setting of the parables Bailey uses the analogy of the relationship between a storyteller and his listener.⁴⁷ If one hears an Englishman tell a story about the days of King Arthur and his court, the teller and the listener throw an invisible mental switch. Everyone knows how the characters are expected to act in the world of the Knights of the Round Table. Bailey says the storyteller has an invisible “grand piano” on which he plays. The known pattern of life from the days of King Arthur is the “piano” on which the storyteller plays. Imagine then an Englishman telling the same story about King Arthur and his court to Alaskan Eskimos. Here, says Bailey, is where the trouble lays. The music of the “grand piano” will not be heard because the piano is in the minds of the English listeners who share a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁵ Larsen, 111.

⁴⁶ D. Buttrick, *Speaking Parables* (Louisville: Westminister John Knox Press, 2000), xiii.

⁴⁷ Bailey, xiv.

common culture and history with the storyteller. In the case of the parables of Jesus, the 21st century preacher is the Eskimo.

The culture of the synoptic parables is that of first-century Palestine.⁴⁸ Parables told in the first-century came from and were rooted in oral tradition.⁴⁹ Scott defines a parable as “a mashal that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a symbol.”⁵⁰ “Short” hints at the primarily oral character of parables.⁵¹ The parables are among the smallest complete narrative units of oral tradition. Short is what one can hold in the ear, much like a joke. Long elaborate jokes are too long to remember, too long to perform easily.⁵² As Walter Ong remarks, the great tragedy in an oral culture is forgetting, so it is important to think memorable thoughts.⁵³ Thus, in a literary device when memory was critical to learning, brevity was essential.⁵⁴ One has to ask, “How did the hearers remember the stories?” Scott says:

...the devices of repetition, formulas, and the law of threes. In the parable A Man Entrusts Property, the scenes of the first two servants are identical; in the A King Wished to Settle Accounts, the forgiven servant *repeats* the master’s scene with his fellow servant. *Formulas* are frequent: “Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 18:2). The law of threes underlines many of the parables. Even though in A Householder Went Out Early the master’s trips to the marketplace are patterned around the hours of the day to make them memorable, the story readily deals with *three* characters---the masters, the first-hired, and the last-hired.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Bultmann, *Tradition*, 166.

⁴⁹ Brian Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 10.

⁵⁰ Scott, 35.

⁵¹ Ibid., 35. Scott says Crossman in Cliffs of Fall, 3-5 deals with the “brevity” of the form, but he derives his theory from written exemplars.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 16-30 summarizes modern studies on orality.

⁵⁴ Stiller, 10.

⁵⁵ Scott, 35-36.

Parables were also concrete, not abstract. Oral people think concretely. “The kingdom of heaven is like …” is not a simple way of talking to simple people, but it is the way an oral culture thinks.⁵⁶ The more concrete the story, the more it assisted the listener in locking it into memory.

The words of Jesus were familiar to the culture. He spoke of everyday people who would be recognized in the marketplaces and rural areas of Palestine. Buttrick provides the following list of the “everydayness”⁵⁷ of the parables:

1. A woman misplaces a small coin, spends all day searching and when she finds the coin throws and expensive late-night party with neighbors to celebrate.
2. A woman bakes bread in a tiny clay oven, following a “sacred” recipe that calls for around sixty pounds of flour! She produces enough bread to fill a modern-day bakery truck.
3. A boss pays one-hour workers the same salary as twelve-hour workers and then is furious when a grievance committee complains.
4. A shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep unprotected to chase after one stray.
5. A man sells everything to buy a field to get a treasure that, according to law, reverts to the field’s original owner anyway.
6. A “fool” builds his house in the middle of a sandy arroyo.
7. A farmer carefully seeds a field but then abruptly quits, neglecting the field completely.
8. A gardener begs time to fertilize an absolutely dead tree.
9. A boss congratulates a manager for marking down the boss’s own collectible invoices.
10. A formal dinner party ends up packed with “street people.”⁵⁸

Another special feature of ancient Middle-Eastern culture is everybody knows how everybody is expected to act in any given situation.⁵⁹ Sider has rightly said, “No [modern] hearer can approach a parable without many preunderstandings.”⁶⁰ For instance, one must learn these facts about the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32).

⁵⁶ Bernard B. Scott, *Jesus, Symbol-Maker for the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 11-17.

⁵⁷ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 36.

⁵⁸ Buttrick, 17.

⁵⁹ Bailey, 35.

⁶⁰ Sider, 168.

The key to understanding the prodigal's intentions in regard to his father is found in his face-saving plan...As a "hired servant" he will be a free man with his own income living independently in the local village. His social status will not be inferior to that of his father and his brother. He can maintain his pride and his independence. But there is more.

If the prodigal becomes a hired servant he may be able to pay back what he has lost...In short, he will save himself. He wants no grace....Sonship has certain distinct disadvantages. If he accepts sonship, he will have to live with his brother and be fed from his brother's property. He will again be under the total authority of his father. He will be denied the self-satisfaction of having "earned his own way."⁶¹

A modern reader would hardly guess that becoming a hired servant was face-saving; nor could we recognize the son's acceptance of sonship as repentance.⁶² Similarly, when Jesus addresses the parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9) to the crowd (12:54), we may sense the main thrust but not feel its edge for lack of some key information.⁶³ As Scott says, "the owner has been coming for three years. Normally fig trees bear annually, usually from early spring until late fall. Three years was the normal time for maturation of a fig tree... The passage of three years indicates that the fig tree is hopelessly infertile."⁶⁴ Why should it continue to waste the ground? And why should the vinedresser continue to invest his time? His hope is a dramatic symbol of God's longsuffering mercy with a stiff-necked generation for whom the image clearly implies little or no hope.⁶⁵

When one reads between the lines, unconsciously inferring Jesus' culture from the parables, we tend to assume that what we see is typical---for example, that women

⁶¹ Sider, 172. He quotes Bailey in *Poet and Peasant*, 176-77.

⁶² Ibid., 172.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Scott, 336.

⁶⁵ Sider, 173.

regularly baked three measures' worth of bread at once, or that imprisonment for debt was a Jewish custom. Thus, as Sider writes, we need certain facts in order to distinguish the commonplace from the usual and Jewish culture from the foreign culture.⁶⁶ These facts will inform us of, for example, "the attitude of a sleeping neighbor to a call for help at midnight, the relationship between a landowner and his renters, the expected response from the father when his son request his inheritance, and the value judgment that renters make regarding the steward when he suggests the reduction of rents."⁶⁷ Bailey agrees, that these facts are crucial to interpreting the parables. He says, "If we are not attuned to those same attitudes, relationships, responses, and value judgments, we do not hear the music of the piano."⁶⁸

Because Jesus' parables were oral, as *parole*, actual performance, they passed out of existence as soon as they were spoken. There is no possibility of "having" or possessing an original parable,⁶⁹ in context. To address this cultural dilemma Bailey employs what he calls "Oriental exegesis."⁷⁰ This method is to use the standard critical tools of Western scholarship in combination with cultural insights gained from ancient literature, contemporary Middle Eastern peasants, and Oriental versions.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Bailey, 35.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Scott, 40.

⁷⁰ Bailey, 29.

⁷¹ Ibid., 30. In the second tool, Past Attempts at Gleaning Insights from Middle Eastern Peasantry, Bailey list three types of efforts. They are: (1) the view from the saddle. Here, a number of people spent some time riding through Bible lands. The problem of the literature of this period is that most of it was written by people who stayed in the Middle East for relatively brief periods of time; (2) the view from the study window, where the author settled down in the Palestinian scene and examined much of the same material but with greater precision. However, this view was primarily concerned with the externals of Palestinian life. For parabolic interpretation we need to know more than the external appearance of agricultural tools; (3) the view from the single village. Here Abraham Rihbany, a Christian Syrian peasant, who became a pastor, and N. Levison, an Oriental Jew who grew up in Palestine in the nineteenth century. Both works

Cultural conditioning affects one's response to what one hears and reads.⁷² When studying the apostle Paul, one is dealing with theology expressed in conceptual language.⁷³ But in the case of parables, their theology is expressed in stories about particular people who lived in a given cultural setting at a specific time in history. To understand the theology of parables, therefore, we must recapture the culture that informs the text.⁷⁴ When we miss the parables in the richness of their Jewish culture, we miss Jesus and his powerful message.⁷⁵ Now that we have the cultural problem, we will turn to the theological context of the parable.

The Theological Context of the Parable

One of the most remarkable aspects of Jesus' parables is the way they speak of God. According to Young, Jesus vividly illustrates through the parables the progressive growth of the kingdom of God⁷⁶ and God's kingdom is not delivered into the hands of select leaders in order to control the lives of others.⁷⁷ Although parables are thoroughly theological, says Stiller, they make no attempt to describe God's attributes.⁷⁸ Instead, the parables lead us into an encounter within the polarity of intimacy and threat of God.⁷⁹

where of great value. A difficulty with both these books is that they are for the most part not scholarly but devotional. Bailey adds a fourth effort. He calls this the view from the mastaba, the mastaba being the mud-brick or stone bench outside the peasant's house on which he sits and talks with his friends by the hour. Here he was able to interact with the village people as an ordinary resident. As a result he was able to experience a new layer of perception. Perceptions like the attitude, relationship, response, and value judgment of the people.

⁷² Sider, 171.

⁷³ Bailey, 27.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁵ B. Young, *Jesus: The Jewish Theologian* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 139.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Stiller., 21.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 21.

Kistemaker comments, “Jesus’ parables teach that God reaches out to them [sinners] and displays His loving kindness and compassion.⁸⁰ Buttrick agrees, in parables, we meet a God of radical love.⁸¹ Lloyd Ogilvie argues that each parable teaches one central lesson that tells us something about God’s nature to which we must respond in specific ways.⁸²

How does one learn to ascertain the theological nature of the parables?

The parables have three basic elements.⁸³ First, the parable has one or more points of contact (referents) within the real world of the listener, which can be called “symbols.” The second element in a parable is the “response” that the original listener is pressed to make to the original telling of the story. The third element is a combination of theological motifs in the parable that together pressed the original listener to make that response.⁸⁴ This combination, Bailey calls, “theological cluster.” We will discuss each of these elements.

What is meant by a point of contact? Bailey says the discussion is complicated by the different use of words. Linnemann writes,

Parables are meant to be forms of argument. It is for this reason that they have only one point of comparison. One can hardly argue several things at once. For this reason we must carefully distinguish between what a parable is arguing and what it assumes. As soon as we draw from a parable a number of different significant ideas, we can be sure that we are missing the meaning that the parable had for its first narrator.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 55.

⁸¹ Buttrick, 37.

⁸² Blomberg, 19.

⁸³ Bailey, 37-38.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁸⁵ E. Linnemann., *Jesus of the Parables* (Translated from the German by John Sturdy New York: Harper, 1996), 23.

From this quotation it is clear that “point of comparison” for Linnemann means “significant idea.” However, Cadoux calls this point of comparison a “point of contact” and understands it quite differently.⁸⁶ He writes,

Allegory, being merely representative, touches that which it represents at many points, while the parable’s essential function is to evoke a judgment in one field and secure its application in another; it does not therefore follow that there is only one point of contact between the story of the parable and the other field to which we carry the judgment evoked by the story. Indeed, it is comparatively seldom that it is so. The judgment elicited by the story is generally a judgment upon a more or less complex situation, and there is always a certain contact between people and things of this situation and those of the situation to which the judgment is carried. In Nathan’s parable there is obviously a certain connection between the rich man and David, the poor man and Uriah, the ewe-lamb and Bathsheba. And further than this, so long as the story of the parable is not unnaturally shaped into similarity with the features of the field to which it is applied, so long as the points of similarity grow naturally from the story, they may be multiplied with advantage, for then they assist the passage of judgment from the one field to the other.⁸⁷

Cadoux is talking about the referents in the life of the listener that correspond to the different symbols in the parable.⁸⁸

On the surface, these two authors’ comments seem somewhat contradictory. One calls for a single point of contact, the other for many. There is also a divergence among them. Where Cadoux says that a parable is intended to “evoke a judgment,” Linnemann holds that a parable is a “form of argument.”⁸⁹ Cadoux’s phrase, “evoke a judgment,” focuses on the interaction between the author of the parable and the hearer who is

⁸⁶ Bailey, 39.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

expected to respond. Linnemann seems to be concentrating on the author of the parable, arguing the point.⁹⁰

To unravel and simplify what Linnemann and Cadoux have said concerning the “point of comparison,” Fee and Stuart offers the following:

The two things that capture the hearer of a joke and elicit a response of laughter are the same two things that captured the hearers of Jesus’ parables, namely their knowledge of the points of reference, which in turn caused them to recognize the unexpected turn in the story. The keys to understanding are the points of reference---those various parts of the story with which one identifies as it is being told. If one misses these in a joke, then there can be no unexpected turn, because the points of reference are what create the ordinary expectations. If one misses these in parable, then the force and the point of what Jesus said is likewise going to be missed.⁹¹

Also, what is meant by points of comparison (referents) can best be illustrated from a parable of Jesus (Luke 7:40-42) recorded in its full original context (vv. 36-50).⁹² Fee and Stuart says, in the context Jesus has been invited to dinner by a Pharisee named Simon. However, the invitation was not to be considered as being “in honor of a visiting famous rabbi.”⁹³ The failure to offer Jesus even the common hospitality of the day was surely intended as something of a put-down. When the town prostitute finds her way into the presence of the diners and makes a fool of herself over Jesus by washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, it only fortifies the Pharisees’ suspicions. Jesus could not be a prophet and leave uncondemned this kind of public disgrace.⁹⁴

Knowing what’s on their minds, Jesus tells Simon a simple story. Two men owed money to a moneylender. One owed five hundred denarii’s (a denarius was a day’s

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Fee and Stuart, 153.

⁹² Ibid., 153.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

wage); the other owed fifty. Neither could pay, so he canceled the debts of both. The point: Who, do you think, would have responded to the moneylender with the greater display of love?⁹⁵

Fee and Stuart provide the three points of reference: the moneylender and the two debtors and the identifications are immediate. God is like the moneylender; the town harlot and Simon are like the two debtors. The parable is a word of judgment calling for response from Simon.⁹⁶ The woman heard the parable too. But what she will hear is not judgment but Jesus'---and therefore God's acceptance of her.⁹⁷

Bailey concludes, the purpose of a parable perhaps is best understood as intending to “evoke a response” from the listener. The exegete must look for the point of comparison (referents) only for the elements that the original listeners would have identified.⁹⁸ He continues, “symbolic elements must contribute to the unity of the parable found in the single response the listener is challenged to make.”

This brings us to the second aspect of the parable, namely the response that the original listener is pressed to make to the original telling of the parable. Concerning “response,” Dodd writes, “The way to an interpretation of a parable lies through a judgment on the imagined situation, and not through the decoding of the various elements in the story.”⁹⁹ Bailey says, Dodd, like Cadoux, sees a parable as calling for a “judgment” on the part of the listener. He defines it, however, as a “response”. Fee and Stuart agrees

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁹ Charles D. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 21.

with Bailey by saying “the point of the parable is to be found in the intended response.”¹⁰⁰

Commenting further on “response”, Bailey writes, “depending on the nature of the parable, the response of the listener may be a decision to act in a particular way or to accept a new understanding of the nature of God’s way with men in the world. This latter response will most likely also lead the listener to act in a particular way toward his fellow man.¹⁰¹ Manson says, in some parables, both responses are called forth. He also says a parable issues a call to a better life and a deeper trust in God.¹⁰²

The third element is the combination of theological motifs in the parable that combined pressed the original hearer to make the response. Bailey asserts that sometimes the theological themes are implied directly in what is said in the parable, sometimes they are presupposed.¹⁰³ For example, in the parable told by Nathan to David:

David hears Nathan’s parable and makes the single response. “I am a sinner.” At the same time, the awareness that he and Uriah are brothers under one covenant is a part of that response; so is the awareness of the holiness of God, who expects righteousness from his anointed king.¹⁰⁴

These different theological themes together, says Bailey, through the artistry of the parable, press the king to make his single response. The unity of the parable is to be found in that single response.¹⁰⁵

The three elements of the parables are combined to call forth a single response.

¹⁰⁰ Fee and Stuart, 154.

¹⁰¹ Bailey, 40.

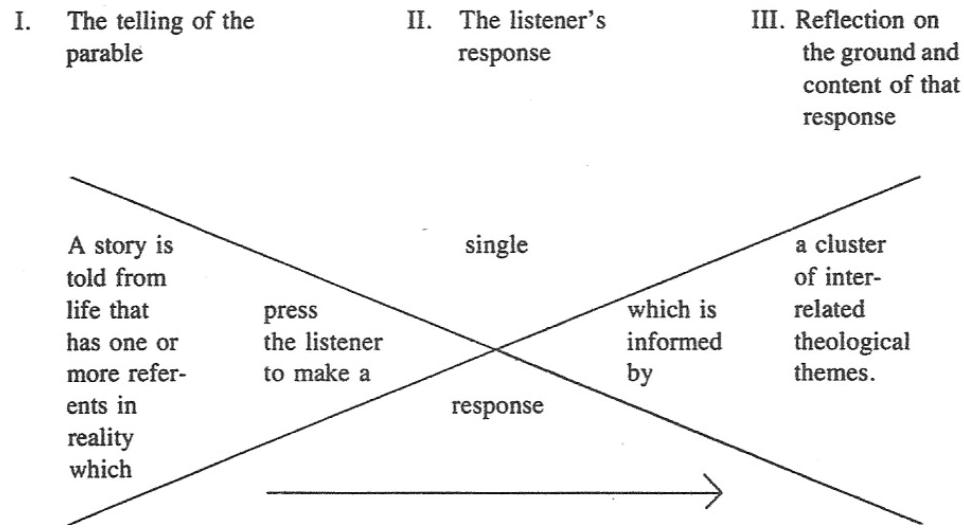
¹⁰² Manson, 80f.

¹⁰³ Bailey, 41.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Bailey offers the following diagram to illustrate his point:



Thus, in the case of the parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-8,11-15), the listener is called to “hear the word of the kingdom and bear fruit.” This decision to hear and bear fruit is based on and informed by a cluster of “theological motifs.” Bailey lists the following:

1. The kingdom is like a seed growing slowly; it is not an apocalyptic revolutionary disruption.
2. The parable speaks of grace. The sower sows liberally even in potentially unfruitful ground.
3. Fruit-bearing is an essential mark of the kingdom.
4. The parable offers the listener hope. There is assurance of a harvest in spite of difficulties.¹⁰⁶

In summary, a parable is a mode of theological speech used to evoke a response.¹⁰⁷ It may have a number of points of comparisons (referents) in the life of the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 42-43.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 43.

listener to whom it is told. The parable does not allow for the listener to remain neutral. The listener is pressed by the parable to do something. A cluster of theological themes informs this response.

Conclusion

Knowledge of the culture that informs the text of Gospel parables is crucial to a full understanding of them.¹⁰⁸ We may confidently misinterpret a parable simply because we are too ignorant of life in ancient Palestine, or of Jewish theology, history, folklore, and symbols.¹⁰⁹ The more one knows about the cultural and theological background of the parables, the more effective the interpretation and communication will be. The subsequent chapter will review the literary nature of parables and the steps one might take to effectively interpret and communicate the universal truths in a 21st century context. To this matter of literary structure we now turn.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Sider, 171.

CHAPTER III

LITERARY NATURE OF THE PARABLE

This chapter examines the literary nature of parables and the steps a 21st century preacher might take to interpret and preach them to the contemporary audience.

God, through the biblical authors, used all kinds of literary forms to communicate: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws, songs, poetry, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses.¹¹⁰ In order to interpret these various literary forms and genres correctly, Robert Stein asserts, we must understand the literary rules and principles that the authors of Scripture were seeking to convey in their writings.¹¹¹

Recognizing the function of literary forms, Fee and Stuart respond:

...we need to know *how* a psalm, a form that was often addressed *to God*, functions as God's Word to *us*, and how psalms differ from the "laws, which were often addressed to people in cultural situations no longer in existence. *How* do such "laws" speak to us, and how do they differ from the moral "laws," which are always valid in all circumstances?¹¹²

Knowledge of these differences is a must for accurately interpreting the Scripture. For instance, if one seeks to interpret a basketball game by the rules that govern a football game confusion can only result.¹¹³ In a similar way, if one seeks to interpret a parable as

¹¹⁰ Fee and Stuart, 20.

¹¹¹ Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 11.

¹¹² Fee and Stuart, 20. Italics are the author's. For the special rules that apply to different literary forms (genres), readers can refer to Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993); Griedanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*; and Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*.

¹¹³ Stein, 12.

if it were an historical account or an historical account as if it were a parable, this will cause an incorrect interpretation in each instance.¹¹⁴

Characteristics of the Parables

The remarkable diversity of the literary forms grouped under the label “parable” is evident when we examine a complete list of those passages typically called the “parables of Jesus.”¹¹⁵

In the study of parables, scholars divide parables into various categories. Arland J. Hultgren notes two basic types of parables: the narrative parables, which include narration and convey the “once upon a time” feel; and the similitude parables, which, though they do contain narration, use an “is like” reference. It is within these two forms that he identifies thirty-eight biblical units that he views as being parables.¹¹⁶

There is value and advantage in using a simple classification of the parables of Jesus in order that we might appreciate something of the range and sweep of this remarkable body of teaching. According to Larsen, no one has used a better categorization than James Montgomery Boice.¹¹⁷ Here is how Boice lists the parables:

- I. Parables of Salvation.
 - A. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the two lost sons, Luke 15.
 - B. Workers in the vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16.
 - C. “Come to the banquet...everything is now ready,”
Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24.
 - D. The narrow door of salvation, Luke 13:22-30.
 - E. The Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke 18:9-14.
 - F. The conflict of the old and the new:

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Long, 89.

¹¹⁶ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. The Bible in Its World. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3,6.

¹¹⁷ James M. Boice, sermons in *Bible Study Magazine*, June 1981; July 1981; August 1981; January 1982; February 1982, as preached over “The Bible Study Hour” and later published in book form.

1. Children of the bridechamber, Matthew 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35.
2. The new patch and the old garment, Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36.
3. Old wineskins and new wine, Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-39.
4. Treasures old and new, Matthew 13:51-52.

II. Parables of the Christian Life.

- A. A tale of two sons, Matthew 21:28-32.
- B. Two stories about lamps, Luke 8:16-18; 11:33-36.
- C. The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37.
- D. On not giving up in prayer, Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8.
- E. On being thankful, Luke 7:36-50.
- F. The chief seats and humility, Luke 14:7-11.
- G. The bondservant and what we do for God, Luke 17:7-10.

III. Parables of Wisdom and Folly

- A. Five foolish women and their friends, Matthew 25:1-13.
- B. The rich fool, Luke 12:13-21.
- C. A shrewd man of the world, Luke 16:1-9.
- D. Wise and foolish builders Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49.
- E. Conditions of discipleship:
 1. The empty house, Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26.
 2. The unfinished tower, Luke 14: 28-30.
 3. The rash warfare, Luke 14:31-33.

IV. Parables of the Kingdom.

- A. The seed growing silently, Mark 4:26-29.
- B. The sower and the seed, Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23; Mark 4:3-8, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15.
- C. The tares and the wheat, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.
- D. The mustard seed, Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19.
- E. The leaven, Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21.
- F. The treasure in the field, Matthew 13:44.
- G. The pearl of great price, Matthew 13:45-46.
- H. The draw-net, Matthew 13:47-50.

V. Parables of Judgment.

- A. The wretched man' wretched end, Matthew 18:21-35.
- B. The wicked trustees, Matthew 21:33-46.
- C. Unprofitable servants and unprofitable goats, Matthew 25:14-46.
- D. The rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31. Note from Boice: Although I list this passage here, I incline to think it is probably not a parable since it uses a proper name and shows other non-parabolic signs.

- E. The wedding garment, Matthew 22:11-14.
- F. The barren fig tree, Luke 13:6-9.

The New Testament parables of Jesus are unique, without parallel. Stein says,

First, a parable compares two unlike things and, as a literary device, acts in three ways: comparative, similar, or parallel. Second, whether short or long, its intent is both to inform, by describing some form of reality, and affect, by providing a picture. Third, its genius is in its ability to disarm the listener and persuade, catching one by surprise. Its vivid story or compelling intrigue makes it hard to ignore. Fourth, in part its impact is because it “comes suddenly, usually before people are able to defend themselves against its message.”¹¹⁸

Relationship of Jesus’ Parables to the Hebrew Tradition

Biblical scholars vary on whether or not Jesus’ parables are unique or if they are like stories told in the region during the Old Testament and intertestamental period.¹¹⁹ In the Old Testament *mashalim* is used to define various literary forms—as a maxim: “like mother, like daughter” (Ezek. 16:44); a byword: “You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples” (Ps. 44:14); a riddle: “I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old” (Ps. 78:2); a parable: Nathan’s story of the poor man’s lamb (2 Sam. 12:1-4); and an allegory: “Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell the house of Israel a parable” (Ezek. 17:2-10).¹²⁰

New Testament scholar Craig Evans locates ten *mashalim* in the Old Testament that loosely resemble those of Jesus.¹²¹ He also notes that the most famous of Old Testament *mashalim* is the Parable of the Ewe Lamb, which Nathan the prophet uses to confront King David about his sin:

¹¹⁸ Robert Stein, *The Genre of the Parables* in Longenecker, Richard N., ed. *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*. (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2000), 47-48.

¹¹⁹ Craig Evans, *Parables in Early Judaism*, in Longenecker, 72-73.

¹²⁰ Stein, in Longenecker, 39-47.

¹²¹ Evans, “*Parables*,” in Longenecker, 54.

There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.⁴ Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him. (2 Sam. 12:1b-4 ^{NIV})

David is outraged that anyone would do such a evil thing and utters, “The man who has done this deserves to die!” (v.5). It is then he learns that he, David, is the man.

Evans lists¹²² other Old Testament mashalim: the Parable of the Two Brothers (2 Sam. 14:4-7; the Parable of the Escaped Prisoner (1 Kings 20:38-43); the Fable of the Thistle and the Cedar (2 Kings 14:8-10); the Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7); the Riddle or Parable of the Eagles and Vine (Ezek. 17:2-10); a Funeral lament (Ezek. 19:1-9); the Parable of the Forest Fire (Ezek. 20:45-49 [Heb. 21:1-5]); the Parable of the Seething Pot (Ezek. 24:2-5). For Evans, Jewish parables of the postbiblical period “are right at home in first-century Jewish Palestine. In most respects Jesus’ parables are not unique. Their emphasis on the kingdom of God roughly parallels the rabbis’ emphasis on God as king, though with important differences. Jesus’ parables begin with introductory phrases such as ‘to what may this be compared?’ or ‘the kingdom of God is like’”¹²³

However, New Testament scholar Craig L. Blomberg notes three reasons why Jesus’ parables differ from the rabbinic tradition:

- (1) The rabbinic tradition generally reinforces the conventional wisdom or biblical exegesis, which is in contrast to the “subversive” strategy of Jesus’ parables. “For the most part, Jesus’ parables subvert Jewish tradition, whereas rabbinic stories reinforce it”. (2) Many of Jesus’ parables make reference to God’s kingdom as being inaugurated through

¹²² Ibid., 56-61.

¹²³ Ibid., 72-73.

his presence. Thus, the distinctiveness of Jesus' parables is neither in their form nor content but in function. (3) Much of the rabbinic texts are caught up in interpretation and application, whereas in Jesus' parables there is little of that.¹²⁴

James Breech, who carried out an eight-year study of stories extant from the time of Alexander the Great (ca. 300 B.C.E.) to Constantine (ca. 300 C.E.) – concludes that “Jesus’ parables are dissimilar from all extant contemporary stories.”¹²⁵ German scholar Joachim Jeremias agrees: “Jesus’ parables are something entirely new. In all the rabbinic literature, not one single parable has come down to us from the period before Jesus; only two similes from Rabbi Hillel who jokingly compared the body with a statue, and the soul with a guest.”¹²⁶

Thus, while the Jewish world was familiar with parables as a means of teaching, it appears that little before or after the life and ministry of Jesus matches his parables. Jesus’ parables are complete in and of themselves with little exegesis or clarification required. Though he affirms another’s quote of an Old Testament passage—as in the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37) when the lawyer quotes the Old Testament (Duet. 6:5; Lev. 19:18)—his story form had its own life and operated within its own authority.

Biblical scholar Brad Young’s conclusion sums it up:

The parables of Jesus, like their counterparts in the rabbinic literature, are unique. Some teaching forms, such as fables or allegories, are somewhat similar to Gospel and rabbinic parables, but the classic form of story parables, such as those in the Gospels and rabbinic literature, is a distinct type of teaching technique that has no parallel. They do not appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha. They do appear frequently in

¹²⁴ Blomberg, 65-68.

¹²⁵ James M. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 24-25.

¹²⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 12.

talmudic texts. In rabbinic literature, they are always told in Hebrew and not Aramaic.¹²⁷

The Structure of the Parable

As a literary device, the parable is constructed to “maximize impact”¹²⁸ with a minimum of words. Kenneth Bailey, in *Poet and Peasant*, demonstrates how the structure itself points the reader to the key idea or phrase within the parable. He shares four types of literary structures that serve to guide the reader in understanding the story itself.

Briefly stated these four are:

- a. Longer or shorter sections of prose that use the inversion principle for an outline.
- b. Poetic sections that use a variety of parallelistic devices in a variety of forms. (Bailey identifies seven patterns)
- c. Sections that have a tight parallelism in the center but are encased with one or more sets of matching sections of prose.
- d. The parables in Luke usually follow a Parabolic Ballad form that is distinct from the above.¹²⁹

Bailey warns that the four Types are not used in isolation from one another. He further states an author may mix his literary types unconsciously.¹³⁰

Type A—Prose Sections That Use Inversion as an Overall Outline

This type is a section of prose that uses the inversion principle for an outline in which the ideas expressed follow an ABCDEF FEDCBA pattern. Bailey says passages

¹²⁷ Young, 271. For more on the uniqueness of the genre of Jesus’ parable see Brian Steller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 19. He provides ten unique characteristics: (1) Jesus’ parables are earthy. (2) Parables do not require previous learning. (3) The parables of Jesus are direct and concise. (4) Parables have a unique structure with a major and some minor points. (5) Many parables use repetition. (6) There is often a conclusion or “end stress.” (7) Parables use a surprise element of a reversal of expectation. (8) Parables often speak to ethical concerns. (9) Parables tend to combine two elements of Jewish tradition, (wisdom and eschatology). (10) Parables always speak to our vision of God and his means of salvation.

¹²⁸ Stiller, 19.

¹²⁹ Bailey, 49. For a detailed analysis and diagram of each of the four types of literary structures see pages 44-75.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

such as Daniel 3:13-30, Luke 18: 18-30, Galatians 3:5-14 and 2 Peter 3:8-18 are type A structures.

The verdict as to whether these structures are conscious or unconscious has not been made. For example, in Luke 18, where the order of the laws selected from the Decalogue has been rearranged for discernible purposes and divergent material brought together to create the “theological mosaic,” it seems clear that the use of the inversion principle was conscious and deliberate.¹³¹ Bailey continues, in the Galatians passage, the selection of passages from the Old Testament and their arrangement in a special order also makes the inversion almost certainly deliberate.¹³² The Second Peter structure and the example from Daniel are more open to the possibility of being unconscious uses of inversion.¹³³

Type B—Seven Poetical Forms Using a Variety of Parallelistic Combinations

These forms are poetical sections in which the ideas are parallel as in AA BB CC.¹³⁴ Bailey points out seven possible patterns. The seven fall into three categories: Forms with one stanza; forms with two stanzas; forms with three or more stanzas.¹³⁵

With one stanza:

Form I: Parallelisms formed into a single stanza that inverts single words or brief phrases. (Example of Form I is Amos 5:24).

Form II. Parallelisms formed into a single stanza that inverts clauses, full sentences, or double lines. (Example of Form II is Psalm 89:28-37).

¹³¹ Ibid., 56.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 20.

¹³⁵ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 56.

Form III: Parallelisms formed into a single stanza by the use of step parallelism. (Example of Form III is Isaiah 55:10-11).

With two stanzas:

Form IV: A poem with two stanzas in which the second stanza is a parallel repetition of the first. (Example of Form IV is Acts 4:8-12).

Form V. A poem with two stanzas in which the second stanza begins with the theme appearing at the center of the first stanza. (Example of Form V is Luke 4:16-20).

With three stanzas:

Form VI: Parallelisms formed into three stanzas in which the third stanza is parallel in some way to the first and the center is extended to a stanza by itself. (Example of Form VI is Luke 11:29-32).

Form VII: A parallelistic structure of three or more stanzas in which a number of the above types are combined. (None occurs in the parabolic material).¹³⁶

These seven forms in biblical literature exhibit precise parallelism in their structure. The Old Testament material has long been called poetry. The same could be said of much of the New Testament material.¹³⁷

Type C—Sections That Have a Tight Parallelism in the Center Are Encased Within One or More Sets of Prose Envelopes

Example passages of type C are Acts 5:1-6, 1 Corinthians 13, and Romans 10:9-10. In summary, this section of prose follows an ABBA pattern, where the middle (B) is encased on either side by prose (A).

Type D—The Parabolic Ballard

The parables in Luke, says Stiller, that follow this type are distinct from the others, in which either stepped parallelism or inverted parallelism is used.¹³⁸ Further, the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

sayings of Jesus often employ a series of three-line stanzas. These stanzas may or may not be inverted. Each stanza introduces a new scene or a significant shift in action.¹³⁹ For example, Luke 10:30-35 is a parabolic ballad.

In summary, these four types of literary structures, (Prose, Poetical, Parallelism, and Parabolic Ballad), are found in both the Old and New Testaments. Bailey asserts, when the author is using literary structure the discovery of that structure is found to be crucial for exegesis for eight reasons. The structure may:

- (1) identify the climatic center; (2) show how the author is relating the center to the outside; (3) make clear the turning point of the passage and alert the reader to look for a significant shift of emphasis in the second half; (4) provide a crucial key to understanding by enabling the reader to see what words, phrases, or sentences are matched with what other words, phrases, or sentences in the structure; (5) demonstrate where newer material has been fitted into an older piece of literature; (6) mark off the literary unit itself with clarity (the beginning and the end are usually distinct and thus the unit identified); (7) provide crucial evidence for textual problems; (8) the parabolic ballad literary type opens new doors for understanding the parables, and a range of New Testament problems related to them.¹⁴⁰

Literary Outline of the Travel Narrative (Jerusalem Document)

All of the parables in Luke fall into the so-called Lukan Travel Narrative. Ninety percent of the material in the Travel Narrative of Luke has a carefully constructed inverted outline.¹⁴¹ Stagg speaks for many scholars when he says of the Travel

¹³⁸ Stiller, *Preaching to Postmoderns*, 20.

¹³⁹ Bailey, 72.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 75. Bailey also mentions that Miesner, in Chiasm and Paul, identifies the function of chiasm as fourfold, “Memory, beauty, meaning and textual considerations.”

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 79. Bailey calls the outline, the “Jerusalem Document.” He says there is no “traveling” done at all and the title “Travel Narrative” is a misnomer. Furthermore, many are confused as to where the “Travel Narrative” ends. (page 82)

Narrative, “it is most difficult if not impossible to outline.”¹⁴² Evans finds it “completely amorphous.”¹⁴³ Yet Goulder discovered what he believed to be a “chiastic structure.”¹⁴⁴ Bailey contends that there are ten “sections” not “six”, as Goulder identified.¹⁴⁵ Bailey’s chiastic structure of the Travel Narrative is as follows:

The Structure of the Travel Narrative (Jerusalem Document): (Luke 9:51 – 19:48)

THE TEN DOUBLE SECTIONS (+ + extra material inserted
into the sections)

{ EXTRA MATERIAL
INSERTED BETWEEN
SECTIONS

1. *JERUSALEM: ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENTS 9:51-56*
 - (a) Day — “the days were fulfilled” 51
 - (b) Death — “for him to be delivered up” 51
 - (c) Fulfilment — “he sent messengers before his face” (Mal. 3:1)
 - (d) Judgment — the call for fire to destroy the village (Mal. 3:5??)
 - (e) Salvation — “the Son of man came not to destroy but to save” 55b⁵
2. *FOLLOW ME 9:57–10:12*
 - (a) People come to Jesus 9:57-62
 - (b) Jesus sends out the seventy 10:1-20 (+ + woes on Chorazin and Bethsaida 10:13-15)
3. *WHAT SHALL I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE? 10:25-41*
 - (a) Dialog on the law 25-28
 - (b) Love the neighbor—the Good Samaritan 29-37
 - (c) Love the Lord—the story of Mary and Martha 38-42
4. *PRAYER 11:1-13*
 - (a) The right content for prayer—the Lord’s prayer 1-4
 - (b) Assurance in prayer—the friend at midnight 5-8
—a poem on a father’s gifts 9-13

{ HIDDEN FROM THE WISE 21
ONLY THE SON KNOWS THE FATHER 22
BLESSED ARE YOUR EARS 23-24

¹⁴² Frank Stagg, *The Journey toward Jerusalem in Luke’s Gospel*, Review and Expositor 64 (1967), 499-512.

¹⁴³ C. F. Evans, *The Central Section of St. Luke’s Gospel*, Studies in the Gospels. Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 40.

¹⁴⁴ M. D. Goulder, *The Chiastic Structure of the Lucan Journey*, Studia Evangelica, II, 195-202.

¹⁴⁵ Bailey, 80.

5. *SIGNS AND THE PRESENT KINGDOM 11:14-32*
- (a) A sign of the kingdom—the dumb speak 14
 - (b) Signs and the kingdom 14-26 (+ + blessed is he who keeps the word 27-28)
 - (c) Signs and the Son of man (Jonah and Solomon) 29-32
- { LIGHT, DARKNESS AND THE EYE 33-36
6. *CONFLICT WITH THE PHARISEES: MONEY 11:37-12:34*
- (a) Conflict with the Pharisees, money—seven woes 11:37-54
(+ + seven misc. sayings 12:1-12)
 - (b) Money—the rich fool 12:13-21
 - (c) Do not be anxious—treasure in heaven 22-34
7. *THE KINGDOM IS NOT YET AND IS NOW 12:35-59*
- (a) The kingdom is not yet—“be like men waiting” 35-48
 - (b) The kingdom is now — fire upon the earth 49-53
— interpret the present time 54-56
— the judgment is near 57-59
8. *THE CALL OF THE KINGDOM TO ISRAEL 13:1-9*
- (a) Repent or perish—Pilate and the Galileans 1-5
 - (b) Produce or perish—the unfruitful fig tree 6-9
9. *THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM 13:10-20*
- (a) Love and not law—the healing on the Sabbath—a woman 10-14
—what about your ox or ass? no reply 15-17
 - (b) Humility—the kingdom is like mustard and leaven 18-20
10. *JERUSALEM: ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENTS 13:22-35*
- (f) Salvation—“will those who are saved be few . . . enter by the narrow door”
 - (e) Judgment—“depart from me . . . you . . . thrust out of the kingdom”
 - (d) Vision—“you will see Abraham and the prophets in the kingdom”
 - (c) Fulfilment—the ingathering of the messianic banquet of the kingdom
(Mal. 1:11)
 - (b) Death—“Herod wants to kill you”
 - (a) Day—“today, tomorrow, and the third day—I am made perfect”
 - (a) Day—“today, tomorrow, and the coming day—I go”
 - (b) Death—“the prophet must not die away from Jerusalem”
 - (c) Fulfilment—a failure of the messianic ingathering—“I would have you under my wings (Mal. 4:2?) and you would not”
 - (d) Judgment—a lament over Jerusalem “Jerusalem . . . killer. . . your house forsaken
 - (e) Vision—“you will not see me until you say ‘blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ ”
 - (f) _____??

- 9' *THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM* 14:1-11
 - (a) Love and not law—a healing on the Sabbath—a man 1-4
 —what about your ass or ox? no reply 5-6
 - (b) Humility— “he who humbles himself will be exalted” 7-11

 - 8' *THE CALL OF THE KINGDOM TO ISRAEL AND TO THE OUTCASTS* 14:12-15:32
 - (a) The great banquet 14:12-24
 —the cost of discipleship 25-35
 - (b) The lost sheep and lost coin 15:1-10
 - (c) The two lost sons 15:11-32

 - 7' *THE KINGDOM IS NOT YET AND IS NOW* 16:1-8, 16
 - (a) The kingdom is not yet
 _____ ??? (19:12-26)
 - (b) The kingdom is now—the unjust steward 16:1-8
 — everyone is pressed by the kingdom 16:16

{ THE LAW IS STILL VALID 17
DIVORCE 18

- 6' *CONFLICT WITH THE PHARISEES: MONEY* 16:9-31

 - (a) Money—God or Mammon 9-13⁶
 - (b) Conflict with the Pharisees, money 14-15⁶
 - (c) Lazarus—the need for treasure in heaven 19-31

OFFENSES 17:1-2
FORGIVENESS 3-4
FAITH 5-6
DUTY 7-10

- 5' SIGNS AND THE COMING KINGDOM 17:11-37

 - (a) A sign of the kingdom—lepers cleansed 11-19
 - (b) Signs and the kingdom of God 20-21
 - (c) Signs and the Son of man (Noah and Lot) 22-37

- 4' PRAYER 18:1-14

 - (b) Assurance and steadfastness in prayer—the Unjust Judge 1-8
 - (a) The right attitude in prayer—the Publican and the Pharisee 9-14

CHILDREN AND ETERNAL LIFE 15-17

- 3' *WHAT SHALL I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE? 18:18-30*

 - (a) Dialog on the law 18-21
 - (b) Love for neighbor— “Give to the poor” 22-28
 - (c) Love for the Lord— “We have left our homes and followed you” 28-

PREDICTION OF THE PASSION 31-34

2' *FOLLOW ME* 18:35-19:9

- (a) People come to Jesus—the blind man 35-43
- (b) Jesus goes out—the call to Zacchaeus 19:1-9

1' *JERUSALEM: ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENTS* 19:10, 28-48

- (f) Salvation—“The Son of man has come to seek and to save the lost”

{THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOT YET 19:11-21}

- (e) Vision—seeing the mighty works they said, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”
- (d) Judgment—a *lament* over Jerusalem—“They will not leave one stone upon another”
- (c) Fulfilment—cleansing of the temple—the purification of the Sons of Levi (Mal. 3:2-4)
- (b) Death—Jerusalem leaders seek to kill him
- (a) Day _____ ???
 (“Destroy this temple and after *three days* I will raise it up again.” Cf. John 2:19, where this reference to “three days” is attached to the cleansing of the temple. This tradition itself occurs in Mark 14:58; 15:29.)

Steps in Studying the Parables for Preaching

How does the preacher communicate the timeless truths of the parable so as to apply the principle of the parable to the lives of hearers today? The peril the preacher must avoid is preaching out of the parables instead of preaching the parables.¹⁴⁶ To avoid misinterpreting the point Jesus intended to make, precautions keep preachers from the fallacy of misinterpretation. In order to understand the parables of Jesus and to discern their message for today, the preacher needs to go through the following steps.

1. Identify the original audience. Is Jesus speaking to the Pharisees and scribes, to the multitudes, or to his disciples?
2. Compare where other Gospel writers locate the same parable and how they interpret it. For example, Luke (19:12-27) and Matthew (25:14-30) each

¹⁴⁶ Larsen, 152.

locate the Parable of the Pounds or Talents in different sequences so as to create a different emphasis.

3. Examine the cultural setting of the parable. Great differences exist between the way people in the Western world think and do things and the way people in Palestine lived and thought.
4. Study the structure of the parable. This helps guide the reader in understanding the story itself.
5. Identify the points of reference. There are certain symbols that the original audience would have immediately identified in the story.
6. Determine what response the original audience is pressed to make after the parable is told.
7. Discern what the parable is saying about God and/or his kingdom.
8. Identify possible modern equivalents to the parable. What symbols of our day can serve as “new points of reference” so that today’s hearers can “get the timeless truth of the parable?” (This step will be explained in more detail in chapter 4).

In chapter five, the above method will be used to demonstrate how the 1st Century parables can be modernized for the 21st Century audience. These parables: Luke 11:5-13; Luke 15:11-32; and Luke 16:1-13; which are unique to Luke and addressed several issues. In Jesus’ parables no sphere of life is outside God’s realm: the political, social, economic, ecclesial, and theological are all intertwined, as in the parables of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31); the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21; the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-8); the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24); the Pharisee and the tax

collector (Luke 18:9-14); the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8).¹⁴⁷ Hence, Jesus' preaching brought a vision of all life as locus for the sacred; nothing is outside the realm of the holy.¹⁴⁸ These issues are prevalent today, which can help the preacher help the congregation to understand that holiness is not found by isolating oneself from "the world," but is experienced in all reality.

Conclusion

The parables of Jesus rank among the supreme literary creations of western literature.¹⁴⁹ Several literary factors of Jesus' parables are noteworthy.¹⁵⁰ They exhibit artistry with respect to unity, coherence, balance, contrast, recurrence, and symmetry.¹⁵¹ Another important aspect of the parable's nature is the element of surprise. It was Jesus' use of "the Samaritan" that brought a gasp to the hearers (Luke 10:33).¹⁵² Further, bad people are rewarded (the Publican, the Prodigal, the Unjust Steward); good people are scolded (the Pharisee, the Elder Brother, the Diligent Workers); God's response to prayer is likened to a man getting rid of a nuisance (the Friend at Midnight); and in general, everybody's idea of who ought to be first or last is liberally doused with cold water (the

¹⁴⁷ Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Bernard Scott, *Re-Imagine the World* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁵⁰ Kistemaker, 49.

¹⁵¹ Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), 161. Ryken illustrates each of these. (1) Unity is seen in the Prodigal Son. The first half describes the younger son, the second half his older brother. The father is the unifying figure who welcomes home both the prodigal son and his brother. (2) Coherence is seen by how Jesus devotes equal attention to all three characters in the parable: the father, the younger son, and his brother. (3) The recurrence of the same phrases and clauses predominates in the parable of the lost son. The phrases, "kill the fatted calf, dead and is alive again, and lost and is found," appear at the end of the first part and emerge again at the end of the second part. (4) The symmetry in the prodigal son is evident in the inverted sequence of the son who left, squandered his goods, was rejected, repented, was accepted, received goods, and was restored.

¹⁵² Stiller, 23.

Wedding Feast, the Great Judgment, Lazarus and Dives, the Narrow Door).¹⁵³ Or sometimes the plot of a parable comes from comparing God's reign with something unclean. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Luke 13:21). To us there is no surprise here. But in Jesus' world, yeast was a symbol of impurity.

All in all, the parables of Jesus were in a category of their own and were quite distinct from other parabolic teachings in their timelessness and universality.¹⁵⁴ Yet the difficulty in preaching these stories to today's audience is that they do not understand the meaning nor are they able to see how they matter. How can preachers bridge the gap to create the starkly real-life recognition that the parables intend?¹⁵⁵ Chapter Four presents a process of how one might redress the 1st Century parable in 21st Century garb.

¹⁵³ Robert Kingdom Capon, *Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 2002), 9.

¹⁵⁴ Kistemaker, 49.

¹⁵⁵ Paul Duke, *The Parables* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 9.

CHAPTER IV

FINDING THE PARABLE'S POINTS OF REFERENCE

The goal of this chapter is three-fold: (1) to demonstrate how 1st Century parables can be retold in a 21st Century context without changing the timeless principle of the parable, (2) to aid the 21st Century preacher with a process of how to determine the parable points of reference the 1st Century hearer had, and (3) to list the three Lukan parables that will be modernized with new points of reference for the 21st century hearer so the 1st Century parable can be understood and applied to life today.

Truth in Parabolic Form

Truth is truth whenever and wherever found. The great theological truths that spoke to the hearts of Bible people can speak to our own day as well.¹⁵⁶ To preach these timeless truths in memorable ways, however, is easier said than done. In a world where everybody is talking, what happens to the person who really has something to say?¹⁵⁷ How does the preacher communicate biblical truth with relevance?

Once upon a time there was a preacher who traveled to many churches across his land with messages about Jesus and his Word. The people of the land greatly appreciated the preacher when he spoke in their churches. They said, “We understand what he says. He doesn’t just know about the Bible. He sounds as if he really knows what we face every day, and he shows us how Scripture really applies to our lives.” As the people’s appreciation of him grew, so did the preacher’s reputation. This, of course, led other preachers (some with godly motives, some with other motives) to want to find out what

¹⁵⁶ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 123.

¹⁵⁷ David Henderson, *Culture Shift* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1998), 21.

was making this man so effective. The ministers invited the traveling preacher to a conference to teach them his “technique.” The preacher came to the conference, but instead of teaching something novel, he talked to the ministers about Jesus’ method of teaching truths with parables. With a story or two of his own, the preacher encouraged the other ministers to speak so that they could be heard and understood, rather than to strive for great oratory in their preaching. “It is better for the message to be understood than for the messenger to be worshiped,” he said.

In the question-and-answer period after the seminar, a minister rose to his feet to ask a question. With genuine perplexity he said, “I went to seminary with you. I know you are a man of great intelligence and that you know deep truths that I do not. But it seems to me, you are not being fair to your own gifts when you put so much emphasis on illustration. You always preach with stories. Why not simply say what Scripture teaches? Shouldn’t we just present truth as truth?

The preacher thought for a moment before responding and then smiled. “To answer,” he said, “let me tell you a story.” He began, “One day Bare Truth came walking into town. What he had to say was very important, but he looked very intimidating with bulging muscles and hard knuckles. Some people remembered when he had hurt them before. As a result, most people went into their houses to wait for Bare Truth to finish his business. Only the strongest of the townspeople did not mind Bare Truth’s visits.

“The next day Parable came to town. He looked just like most of the town’s people and dressed in ordinary clothes, but he told of all the places he had been and the sights he had seen. All the people loved to visit with Parable. They came out to greet him

and invited him into their homes. ‘Come in and have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie,’ many offered.

“Bare Truth was upset that Parable got a reception so unlike his own. He went to the other town visitor and sad, ‘Tell me, Parable, why do people greet you with such warmth when I am Truth they should hear?’

“Instead of answering, Parable took off his hat and jacket and put them on Bare Truth. Truth was transformed. He was no less strong. He was no less Truth. But the people saw him in an entirely different light. When he put on Parable’s clothes, Truth showed he really was concerned that the people hear him. When the people recognized that Truth cared enough about them to find out what he needed to do to have them listen to him, they listened all the more intently. The very people who had invited Parable for coffee and donuts, now invited Truth, too.

“To this day, when Truth has business in town, he puts on Parable’s clothes so that the people will hear him and deal with him.”¹⁵⁸

People love a story. Watch children and adults come to attention when a minister makes a shift in the sermon with, “Let me tell you a story.”¹⁵⁹ It is not surprising that the best-known parts of the Old Testament tend to be stories: Noah and the ark, Jonah and the “whale,” David and Goliath. The same is true for the New Testament, beginning with Jesus’ birth in a manger. Apart from these stories of history, what people tend to

¹⁵⁸ Adapted from a story told by Annette Harrison in “*Tell Me a Story*,” by Joseph Schuster in St. Louis Home (May 1989), 17-18.

¹⁵⁹ Stiller, 9.

remember from the Bible are the grand stories, the parables of Jesus such as the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son.¹⁶⁰

Translating the Parable to a 21st Century Context

In every era, preachers have preached the parables.¹⁶¹ According to Buttrick, in *Speaking Parables*, in the last century or so, parables have been preached in three primary ways: verse by verse, in a textual-topical system, and in a life-situation scheme.¹⁶² In summary, he asserts that current homiletic strategies appear to fail. The verse-by-verse system atomizes parables, separating parts and moving toward allegory; the textual-topical system objectifies parables, distilling a topic and applying “truths” in categorical points; and the life-situation approach domesticates parables into helpfulness, thus preventing any encounter with the living God.¹⁶³ Now it is our turn. How will we preach parables in the 21st century in ways that honor them and continue their amazing work? I suggest two things.

First, the preacher should address the parables in their present biblical context. The parables are in written context, and through the exegetical process described earlier, (See the section: Steps in Studying the Parables, page 32), one can discern their meaning. The task of the preacher, however, is not complete after having studied the text.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Buttrick, 39.

¹⁶² Ibid. See pages 39-40 for a complete analysis of each approach.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 40.

The preacher has to take what Jesus said and translate that into a contemporary understanding and application¹⁶⁴ and to replicate its [the parable] dynamics for contemporary hearers.¹⁶⁵

Blomberg calls this “the process of contemporizing the parable.”¹⁶⁶ Further, Eric Osborn and Timothy Sensing, in *Parable and Exposition*, call for “imitating the genre of parable in today’s pulpit.”¹⁶⁷ Retaining the story line of the parable but changing the time zone helps the preacher retell the parable in such a way that one’s own hearers might feel the anger, humiliation, shock or joy, the original hearers experienced.

The contemporization of a parable may include some modern equivalent to the biblical story in an introduction, in one or more illustrations interspersed within the body, or in a conclusion to the message.¹⁶⁸ Henry Mitchell demonstrates the technique from Sojourner Truth, in *The Recovery of Preaching*:

Jesus told a story about laborers hired to work in a vineyard. I can see the story. When I was a pastor in the cotton country there was a certain block where there were people standing around all the time---any hour. And most of them were not leisure class. Leisurely folk don’t dress like they did. Some had paper sack lunches, but they were looking for no picnic. But you could tell what they were about if you would go down to the block at four or five o’clock in the morning, just before day, a big old raggedy bus would pull through there, and a man would hire folks to chop cotton. If you would watch long enough sometimes, the bus would come again and fill up again. They would work a long day in the fields and the bus would bring them back to the block around six or seven o’clock at night. Well this is the way it was. Jesus said the man hired a load and took them to the field. But he saw it wasn’t enough, so he came back in the block three hours later and hired some more. It still wasn’t enough and he

¹⁶⁴ Stiller, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Reid, 26.

¹⁶⁶ Blomberg, 24.

¹⁶⁷ Eric Osborn, Parable and Exposition ABR 22 (1974): 11-22; Timothy R. Sensing, “Imitating the Genre of Parable in Today’s Pulpit,” RestQ 33 (1991): 193-207.

¹⁶⁸ Bloomberg, 25.

hired still some. And again, even in mid-afternoon, and finally just an hour before quitting time, he came and hired some more.¹⁶⁹

Listeners who knew both the world of the cotton fields and the Bible moved easily back and forth with the preacher. Other preachers, like Clarence Jordan and Bill Doulos, offer similar sermons in, “*Cotton Patch: Parables of Liberation.*”¹⁷⁰

The especially creative preacher may craft her or his own version of a parable. Fee and Stuart share an example of how the Good Samaritan might be told, with new points of reference, for a modern audience. The audience is a typical, well-dressed, middle-American Protestant congregation.

A family of disheveled, unkempt individuals was stranded by the side of a major road on a Sunday morning. They were in obvious distress. The mother was sitting on a tattered suitcase, hair uncombed, clothes in disarray, with a glazed look to her eyes, holding a smelly, poorly clad, crying baby. The father was unshaved, dressed in coveralls, a look of despair on his face as he tried to corral two other youngsters. Beside them was a run-down old car that had obviously just given up the ghost.

Down the road came a car driven by the local bishop; he was on his way to church. And though the father of the family waved frantically, the bishop could not hold up his parishioners, so he acted as though he didn’t see them.

Soon came another car, and again the father waved furiously. But the car was driven by the president of the Kiwanis Club, and he was late for a statewide meeting of Kiwanis presidents in a nearby city. He, too, acted as though he did not see them and kept his eyes straight on the road ahead of him.

The next car that came by was driven by an outspoken local atheist, who had never been to church in his life. When he saw the family’s distress, he took them into his own car. After inquiring as to their need, he took them to a local motel, where he paid for a week’s lodging while the father found work. He also paid for the father to rent a car so he could look for work and gave the mother cash for food and new clothes.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Henry Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 84.

¹⁷⁰ C. Jordan, B. Doulos, *Cotton Patch: Parables of Liberation* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2001).

¹⁷¹ Fee and Stuart, 160.

Richard Jensen, in *Telling the Story*, calls this “story preaching.” Here, the sermon eases listeners into the world of make-believe where the good news possibilities of the gospel are hinted at in oblique ways. Also, the sermon attempts to remain faithful to the narrative dynamics of the text while imaginatively recasting it.¹⁷² Ernest Campbell, during his pastorate at Riverside Church in New York City, preached a sermon he entitled “Reflections on a Mugging.” In this modern rendering of the Good Samaritan the scene shifts from the Jericho road to a Manhattan street. The time in this story is also altered. The listeners, at the creative bidding of the preacher, arrive with the mugging in progress and are challenged to respond.¹⁷³

Blomberg notes, John Killenger has produced wonderful and generally accurate contemporizations of the parables for a modern, Western Christmastime setting. Killenger describes his accounts simply as “a collection of the stories of Jesus retold in the language of Christmas” with “every attempt to preserve the meaning and force of the parables as Jesus told them.”¹⁷⁴

Danae Dobson and James Dobson’s, “*Parables for Kids*,” are eight contemporary stories based on the parables of Jesus. At the end of each contemporary story, Dobson explains the relationship to the biblical parable and helps the reader apply the truth of that parable to life today. The following story is based on the Parable of the Persistent Widow, Luke 18:1-8.

The aroma of freshly baked pretzels filled the air. “One sugar-coated and a lemonade, please,” said Rachel, placing three dollars on the

¹⁷² Richard Jensen, *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 164.

¹⁷³ R. Hughes, *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 166.

¹⁷⁴ See Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 18. Killenger John *Parables for Christmas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

counter. She turned to the girl standing beside her. "What'll you have, Tori?" "Just a plain one," answered her friend, fumbling in her purse for her wallet. She glanced at her big sister, who was sitting on a nearby bench waiting for them. "Want a pretzel, Andrea?" "No, thanks," replied the older girl.

Rachel and Tori munched on their snacks as they walked around the shopping center with Andrea. One of their favorite activities on Saturday was hanging out at the mall. They loved to shop, eat, and sometimes take in a movie. It made them feel grown up and important.

"Look at those sunglasses!" exclaimed Tori, hurrying to a store window. "They're Ray-Bans! Aren't they cool?" Rachel bent down to get a closer look. "They aren't my style, but they'd look good on you. Are you going to buy them?" "Can't right now," Tori sighed. "Maybe I'll ask for them for my birthday." She bit into her pretzel and tore off a piece.

Tori's sister smiled and walked to another display window. "I had that dream again last night," said Rachel. "The one about your dad?" asked Tori. "Yeah. It's been five years since he died, but I still feel really sad sometimes." "That's normal," said Rachel. "But it never gets any easier. I keep praying that someone will come and, you know, be kind of like a father. No one could take the place of my real dad, but I keep asking God to send somebody. Mom and I need someone to fix stuff and take us camping---things like that."

Tori looked up and rolled her eyes. "Rachel, come on! You've been praying that silly prayer forever, and nothing has changed. You're ten years old! It's time to grow up and accept things the way they are." Tori wadded up her pretzel wrapper and threw it in the trash.

Rachel felt a surge of anger, almost as if she'd been slapped in the face. Tori was a good friend, but she often said whatever came to mind without thinking. She was too outspoken and not all sensitive to people's feelings. Sometimes Rachel let her get away with it, but not today!

"Just a minute, Tori," she snapped. "Who gave you the right to tell me to give up hope? I believe a miracle can happen no matter how long it takes. Besides, we learned in Sunday school that Jesus taught us to never doubt that he hears our prayers. You either weren't there, or you weren't listening that day!"

"I'm sorry, Rae," Tori said. "It's just that I don't like seeing you waste your time on a fantasy." "I'm not wasting time," said Rachel assuredly. "Just because I keep praying for something doesn't mean I don't have a life." "I know, I know," said Tori. "Let's drop it. I don't want to argue anymore."

Rachel agreed, but she was still irritated at her friend. What would Tori know about prayer anyway? She didn't even go to church very often. After trying on silly hats and holding bunnies in the pet store, the girls grew tired of the mall. They rode their bikes home and parted ways at the intersection.

"Will you be at church tomorrow?" asked Rachel. "Maybe," said Tori, pedaling down the street behind her sister. "That probably means no," Rachel mumbled.

She arrived home to find her mother getting dressed for the evening. "Where are you going?" she asked. Her mother smiled. She had a sparkle in her eye that Rachel hadn't seen for a long time---not since before her father passed away. "Remember that man I told you about?" asked her mother. "Bob?" "Yes! Well, he's taking me to dinner and the theater tonight. Do I look OK?" She turned toward the mirror and smoothed her dress. "You look great, Mom," said Rachel. "Grandma will be here in a minute," said her mother. "And your dinner is in the microwave. All you have to do is heat it up." "OK," said Rachel. She went to the kitchen and set the timer on the microwave. Then she leaned on the counter and stared out the window.

I wish Dad were here so Mom wouldn't go out with someone else, she thought. Bob sounds like a bore. He's a junior high teacher who's never been married and likes to go to dumb places like the theater. That's all I know about him. Oh well, if he makes Mom happy, I guess he's OK. Maybe I'm just being selfish.

She took her dinner out of the microwave. As she thanked God for the food, Rachel prayed again for a father. "Please, God, send someone who will be just like my dad." Then Rachel flipped on the TV. Gilligan's Island was on.

Pretty soon Mother walked in with her date. She was holding a big bouquet of flowers.

"Honey, I'd like you to meet Bob," she said. Rachel glanced up from the television and lifted her hand. "Hi," she said. "It's nice to meet you, Rachel," said Bob, grinning. "I've heard so much about you." Rachel smiled. She wanted to say, "How original!" Instead she said, "Thanks. Have a good time tonight." "We will," said Bob. He looked at her mother that silly grin again. Rachel sighed and turned her attention back to the TV.

That first night with Bob was just the beginning. It seemed every time Rachel turned around, there was Bob. Always taking her mother out, bringing something by, or helping around the house. It was nice of him to fix the leaky faucet and the VCR, but Rachel was starting to tire of his being there. She missed the days when she and her mom were alone. After all, they had a life before he came into the picture. Bob was always friendly to Rachel, but she only tolerated him. She didn't like it when her mother spent time with someone other than her dad, even though she really did want another father. Beside, Bob wasn't who she had in mind---after all, he didn't even like to go camping.

One Saturday Rachel was doing homework when the doorbell rang. When she opened the door, there stood Bob, holding two sacks of Chinese food. "Hi," he said cheerfully. "I was in the area and thought I'd bring lunch over." "Come on in," Rachel said, motioning toward the

kitchen. Bob waved to Rachel's mother, who was vacuuming the living-room carpet. Then he glanced at the papers spread all over the table.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Lots of stuff," Rachel answered. "I've got a test Monday, a book report to finish, and tons of math homework." Bob pulled up a chair. "Maybe I can help," he said. "That's OK," said Rachel. "You don't have to." "I want to," he said. He was leaning down so he could see her face. Rachel noticed his eyes were kind and trusting. There was a certain sparkle that reminded her of her father--the way he used to look at her when he told bedtime stories. "Are you sure?" she asked timidly. "Absolutely," said Bob. "Put me to work!" "Well, OK," said Rachel. "I guess I could use some help with math. It's never been my best subject, and we're learning new stuff right now."

For the next half hour Bob explained math problems and guided her along. Then he helped make a cover for her book report. They designed it in the shape of Texas since that was the subject of the book. "It's perfect!" Rachel squealed. "I'll have the best-looking report in my class!"

Her mother came into the kitchen and pointed to the sacks of cold Chinese food on the counter. "I'm hungry," she said. "Aren't you two going to stop long enough to eat?" "Oh, yeah," laughed Rachel. "I guess we forgot."

When Bob left later that afternoon, Rachel thanked him for helping her with her homework. "No problem," he replied. "After all, I am a teacher. Don't hesitate to call if you need me." This time that little grin wasn't so annoying. "You know, Mom," said Rachel, closing the door, "I kind of like Bob. He's a nice guy." Her mother brushed a wisp of hair from Rachel's face. "I already knew that," she said.

From then on it didn't bother Rachel that Bob was around so much. He took her to the beach, the movies, and the country fair. He even went with her to an open house at school. It felt good to introduce her teacher to Bob and be able to say he was a teacher too. And when Rachel told Bob about Danny, the mean kid in class who sat behind her and pulled her ponytail, Bob taught her how to stand up for herself. Danny left her alone after that.

One Saturday Rachel and Tori were at the mall with Andrea again, eating French fries and going in and out of stores.

"Guess what," said Rachel. "Huh?" Tori mumbled. "My mom got engaged. She and Bob are getting married!" "Really?" asked Tori. "Are you OK with that?" "There was a time when I would have said no, but not anymore," said Rachel. "Like I always say, no one could ever take the place of my real dad, but I like Bob. He helps me with my homework and takes me places and stuff." "Then he's the answer to your prayer," said Tori. "Huh?" asked Rachel. "Your prayer! You know, the one about finding another dad, and I told you it would never happen, and ..." Rachel felt a chill go up her spine. "That's right!" she said. She turned toward the balcony and put both hands on the railing.

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize it until now,” said Rachel. “Bob is the answer to my prayer! I just never made the connection. I was always asking for someone who was just like my dad, and Bob is totally different. He doesn’t like to go camping, but I can talk to him about anything and he listens. He’s also smart and funny and … he’s just really nice.”

That afternoon when Rachel got home, she went into her room and closed the door. Then she knelt by her bed and gave thanks to the Lord. She knew she’d never forget that moment for the rest of her life. Her heart was filled with joy!

On the day of the wedding, Rachel got to stand next to her mother as maid of honor. She caught the bouquet, too, even though she knew the older girls let her have it on purpose. As she touched the tiny petals, they seemed to symbolize everything good in her life. They were a symbol of love, family, and answered prayer.

Jesus really was listening to me all along, Rachel thought to herself. I should have known he’d answer if I didn’t give up!¹⁷⁵

Dobson makes the connection with the parable by stating: What should we do when the Lord doesn’t answer very quickly? The Bible tells us the Lord is always listening, and he will do what is best when the time is right. He continues, in the story called “The Parable of the Persistent Widow,” the woman had a problem that she wanted a judge to solve for her. This woman bugged the judge day after day for an answer. Finally the judge got so tired of the woman bothering him that he did what she wanted.¹⁷⁶

He concludes, this is the meaning of the parable. If a selfish judge would help someone just to get rid of the person, how much more God will help his own children, whom he loves. God never gets tired of hearing from us.¹⁷⁷

The above examples of “cultural translation”¹⁷⁸ answers Buttricks’ question: Can we modernize the parable and retell it, without domesticating it, by making up a parallel

¹⁷⁵ Danae Dobson and James Dobson, *Parables for Kids* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 13-23.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Adapted by Robert Hughes in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 165.

modern story? The parables had significance for the particular setting in which they were delivered. Their ultimate significance, however, goes far beyond that original setting. They can be applied to new situations that were not contemplated at the time they were first spoken.¹⁷⁹ The keys to doing this, without changing the timeless truth of the parable, is understanding the points of reference in the parable---those various parts of the story with which one identifies as it is being told. Fee and Stuart explains this with an analogy of a joke.

The whole point of a joke and what makes it funny is that the hearer has an immediacy with it as it is being told. It is funny to the hearer precisely because he or she gets “caught,” as it were. But it can only catch them if they *understand the points of reference* in the joke. If you have to interpret the joke by explaining the points of reference, it no longer catches the hearer and therefore fails to capture the same quality of laughter. When the joke is interpreted, it can then be understood all right and may still be funny (at least one understands what one should have laughed at), but it ceases to have the same impact.¹⁸⁰

The two things that capture the hearer of a joke and elicit a response of laughter are the same two things that captured the hearers of Jesus’ parables, namely, their knowledge of the points of reference, which in turn caused them to recognize the unexpected turn in the story.¹⁸¹ We could call the points of reference in the parable the punch line. If we miss what was the 1st Century punch line we miss the parable’s lesson (s). How do we identify the points of reference intended by Jesus that would have been caught by the original hearers?

¹⁷⁹ Ronald Vallet, *Stepping Stones of The Steward* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 6-7.

¹⁸⁰ Fee and Stuart, 153.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Finding the Points of Reference

In a recent episode of the Simpsons, churchgoing was the subject. In this segment God appeared to Homer in a dream and ended up agreeing with Homer's reasons for skipping church:

"Rev. Lovejoy's sermons are boring, and watching football is more satisfying."¹⁸²

As any attorney knows, if you bore the jury you will lose the case.¹⁸³ Jesus could have known this as well. He was never boring when he preached; neither should we who preach what he preached. When he told parables there was something in them that was familiar to the people. It was as though Jesus was taking the people on a journey. He took them through landscapes that they knew. They would recognize certain objects, laws and customs, and could relax and feel safe. Then, abruptly, the scenery would turn strange, even surreal. Suddenly, Jesus would disappear; the tour was over.

What Jesus used to keep his audience from falling asleep as he began telling a parable is the same thing that the modern preacher can use to keep the listener awake as he or she begins a parable. Jesus began with what was familiar to the people, namely points of reference. Again, the points of reference are only those parts of the story that draw the hearer into it. These are the parts with which he or she is to identify in some way as the story proceeds.

The task of finding the points of reference in the parable is a combination of three things: (1) read the parable out loud repeatedly, (2) identify the original audience, because the meaning of the parable has to do with how it was originally heard, and (3) try

¹⁸² Century Marks, Christian Century, November 4, 1992, p. 989.

¹⁸³ Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 94.

to discover how the original hearers would have identified with the story, and therefore what they would have heard.

Fee and Stuart uses the above steps to identify the points of reference in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).¹⁸⁴ In the parable, as you read it again and again, you will notice that it is told to a lawyer who, wanting to justify himself, had asked, “And who is my neighbor?” He knows what the Law says about loving one’s neighbor as oneself and he is prepared to define “neighbor” in terms that will demonstrate that he piously obeys the Law.

There are only two points of reference in the story---the man in the ditch and the Samaritan---although other details in the parable help to build the effect.¹⁸⁵ Fee and Stuart note the following: (1) The two who pass by on the other side are priestly types---the religious order that stands over against the rabbis and the Pharisees, who are the experts in the law. (2) Almsgiving to the poor was the Pharisees’ big thing. This was how they loved their neighbors as themselves.¹⁸⁶

Notice, then, how the teacher of the law is going to get caught by the parable. A man falls into the hands of robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a common event. Bailey agrees, “the seventeen-mile descending road through the desert from Jerusalem to Jericho has been dangerous all through history”.¹⁸⁷ Two priestly types next go down the road and pass by on the other side. The story is being told from the point of view of the man in the ditch, and the teacher of the law has now been “set up.” *Of course,*

¹⁸⁴ Fee and Stuart, 155.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸⁷ Bailey, 41.

he would think to himself, who would expect anything else from priests? The next person down will be a Pharisee, and he will show himself neighborly by helping the poor chap.¹⁸⁸ But no, it turns out to be a Samaritan! The modern reader will have to appreciate how contemptuously the Pharisees held the Samaritans if we are going to hear what he heard. Notice that the expert lawyer does not even bring himself to use the word “Samaritan” at the end.

A second example for finding the points of reference is in the Workers in the Vineyard. There are three points of reference: the landowner, the full-day workers, and the one-hour workers.¹⁸⁹ The parable tells of an owner who hires field hands to help bring in grapes at harvest time. He goes out several times during the day to recruit workers, so that some field hands work all day and others only an hour. Then the surreal detail---everyone is paid the same wage. The original audience is those who identify with the full-day laborers, since they alone are in focus at the end.

The key to finding the points of reference in the parable is repeatedly reading and listening to it again and again, identifying the original audience and determining what it well may have heard. I must make three cautionary notes here: (1) the preacher has to follow some kind of exegetical guidelines in order to bridge the cultural gap between him or her and Jesus’ original audience, (2) the preacher should not attempt to find points of reference for all the elements in the parable, and (3) the point of the parable is not in the points of reference. The point of the story, according to Bailey, is to be found in the intended response.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Fee and Stuart, 155. Author’s italic.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹⁰ Bailey, 39.

Take, for example, the parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-20; Matthew 13:3-23; Luke 8:5-15). The points of reference are the four kinds of soils. The four kinds of soil are like four kinds of responses to the proclamation of the kingdom. The point of the parable, however, is the urgency of the hour: “Take heed how you hear”.¹⁹¹

Conclusion

Everyone who hangs around churches has heard of the parables of Jesus. They are familiar. We speak of helpful neighbors as “Good Samaritans” or label wayward children “Prodigal.” We use the word “talent” because of Matthew’s famous parable. But, mysteriously, after twenty centuries they still generate retelling and still are puzzling.¹⁹² In the next chapter, the following three Lukan parables will be retold with new points of reference: (1) The Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-13), (2) The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and (3) The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13).

¹⁹¹ Fee and Stuart, 158

¹⁹² Buttrick, 3.

CHAPTER V

REDRESSING THE 1st CENTURY PARABLE IN 21st CENTURY GARB

In this chapter I will: (1) present three parabolic expository sermons, (2) provide three contemporary stories based on the same three Lukan parables with 21st Century points of reference, and (3) present the seminar format on how to teach 21st Century preachers to preach the 1st Century parables with relevance to their audience without losing 1st Century truths by contemporizing parables.

Format for Examining the Parables

Though the parables Jesus told were rather simple, the lessons he taught are not always caught. As Stanley Ellisen puts it, some have been notoriously misunderstood and therefore misapplied.¹⁹³ To assist the preacher in sermon development, I will state how I will approach each parable and then use that pattern to examine each parable.

Three parables will be studied in the following way.

Gospel of Luke

Each parable selected is recorded only in Luke's gospel. Why Luke? Luke's parables show special concern for the poor, the physically challenged, and social rejects. At the outset of the Gospel, Jesus proclaims his role: "to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18,19). Luke seems to empathize with human error, religious fanatics, and moral failure. Overall, the heart of Luke's Gospel is God's mercy to sinners. This

¹⁹³ Stanley Ellisen, *Parables in the Eye of the Storm*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 53.

message has to continue to be told. As Haddon Robinson once said, the Church is in the business of communicating the greatest story of all time.

Text

Unless otherwise noted, the biblical translation that I reference in the study is the New International Version.

The Type of Literary Structure of the Text

The structure of the text demonstrates how the structure itself points the reader to the key idea or phrase within the parable. (The literary nature of the parable is discussed in detailed in Chapter III, pages 20-34).

Position of the Parable within the Wider Text

This helps the reader to discover why Jesus told the parable. At times the parable was told because of a question that was raised by someone in the audience. Also, the parable was a means to address deeper issues, such as the kingdom of God or what it means to be a disciple.

Title

The preacher should approach the predetermined titles of the parable with caution. Barbara Reid cautions us to be wary of the title attached to any given parable. She warns, the danger is that these labels, none of which are in the Greek manuscripts, circumvent the preacher's exploration of other possible meanings.¹⁹⁴ Capon agrees that so many of Jesus' most telling parables have been egregiously misnamed.¹⁹⁵ Scott, in *Hear Then the Parable*, provides a list of the Traditional names and possible new ones.¹⁹⁶ What if we

¹⁹⁴ Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 212.

¹⁹⁶ Scott, *Hear Then the Parables*, 465.

did not call it “The Good Samaritan” but “The Parable of the Pathetic Priest and the Lousy Levite” or “The Parable of the Wounded Traveler?” Would we see something different, miss something different?¹⁹⁷

Cultural Factors

Great differences exist between the way people in the 21st Century do things and think and the way people in 1st Century Palestine lived and thought. Thus, it is critical that the preacher examine the cultural context of the parable in which it was originally presented.

Word Study

Certain words had special meaning to the people of Jesus’ day. The preacher will need to have tools to get as close as possible to the original meaning of key words.

Subject

Each parable addressed a topic. Writing the subject helps the preacher clarify the topic the parable is addressing.¹⁹⁸

Complement

The complement conveys what the parable says about the subject.¹⁹⁹

The Surprise

Each parable contains a trap door, a turn in the road, or an unexpected resolution. Most of the time the unexpected is the tool that Jesus used to shatter the audience’s conventional way of relating to God and others. For the modern listener, the challenge is to grasp the cultural significance of the parable in order to understand it.

¹⁹⁷ Duke, *The Parables*, 12.

¹⁹⁸ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 31-44.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

Exegetical Outline

The parable is outlined without regard to its homiletical outline.

Homiletical Possibility

The parable then is examined with respect to how it might be written for preaching.

The Big Idea

The shape of the sermon is framed around “the big idea” of the sermon.²⁰⁰ The “big idea” informs the audience what the parable is talking about and how it relates to them.

***The Hermeneutical Possibility*²⁰¹**

Here, the parable’s points of reference for the original hearer will be contrasted with new points of reference for the contemporary hearer.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Fee and Stuart, 160.

Parable One

The Friend at Midnight Luke 11:5-13

Text

⁵Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

⁷”Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’

⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give as much as he needs.

⁹So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

The Type of Literary Structure of the Text

The parable of the Friend at Midnight is a parabolic ballad with some of the features of the poetical Form IV. It has two stanzas of six units each and each stanza inverts.²⁰²

And he said to them,

Can any one of you imagine having a friend and going to him at midnight

(WHAT WILL NOT HAPPEN)

A 1	and saying to him, “Friend, <i>lend me</i> three loaves	REQUEST (GIVE)
2	for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey	REASON FOR REQUEST
3	and I have nothing to set before him.”	APPEAL TO DUTY
3’	And will he answer from within, “Don’t bother me.	DUTY REFUSED
2’	The door is now closed and my children are in bed with me.	REASON FOR REFUSAL
1’	I cannot get up and <i>give</i> you anything?”	REQUEST REFUSED (GIVE)
I tell you	(WHAT WILL HAPPEN)	

²⁰² Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 120-135.

B 1	though he will not <i>give</i> him anything	NOT ANSWER REQUEST (GIVE)
2	having arisen	ARISING
3	because of being his friend	NOT FOR FRIENDSHIP'S SAKE
3'	but because of his avoidance of shame	BUT FOR HONOR'S SAKE
2'	he will get up	WILL ARISE
1'	and <i>give</i> him whatever he wants. ³	REQUEST GRANTED (GIVE)

I say to you

The subject of each line is:

B 1	if he will not give to him	the sleeper
2	having arisen	the sleeper
3	because of being a friend of his	the sleeper
3'	but because of his (<i>avaiseia?</i>)	?
2'	he will arise	the sleeper
1'	and will give him whatever he needs. ⁵⁰	the sleeper

And to you I say

1	<i>ask</i> , and it shall be <i>given</i> to you	2 nd person
2	seek, and you shall find	
3	knock, and it shall be opened to you.	
1'	For everyone who <i>asks</i> receives	3 rd person
2'	and the one who seeks finds	
3'	and to the knocker it shall be opened.	

And will any one of you

A	if the son <i>asks</i> the father for bread,
A'	will he <i>give</i> him a stone?
B	or a fish, instead of a fish
B'	will he <i>give</i> him an eel (snake)?
C	or if he <i>asks</i> an egg
C'	will he <i>give</i> him a scorpion?

If therefore

4	you being evil	2 nd person
5	you know good gifts	
6	to <i>give</i> to your children	
4'	how much more the Father	3 rd person
5'	out of heaven Holy Spirit	
6'	shall <i>give</i> to those <i>asking</i> him.	

Position of the Parable within the wider Text

In Luke, prayer is a prominent theme.²⁰³ A question by a disciple is the launching pad of this parable (Luke 11:1). Jesus responds and then, along with providing a model prayer (Luke 11:2-4), tells the parable of a friend in need. With that as the prologue, Jesus tells a parable of the Friend at Midnight.²⁰⁴

Title

The traditional title of the parable is: The Friend at Midnight. Scott calls it: Who needs a Friend?²⁰⁵ Reid labels it: A Friend in Need.²⁰⁶ James names it: A Friend in the Night.²⁰⁷

Cultural Factors

The Oriental responsibility for his guest is legendary.²⁰⁸ In Palestinian communities there were built-in expectations requiring people to help one another. So integral was this bond to village life that Jesus in this parable did not need to comment. The honor of the village was at stake and no self-respecting villager would let his friend, and thus the whole village, down.²⁰⁹ So, when a guest arrived at a house, even if in the middle of the night, the host was responsible for setting out a meal larger than the visitor could possibly eat.²¹⁰ Bread is not the meal, however.²¹¹

²⁰³ Other incidents in which Jesus instructs the disciples on prayer are: Luke 6:28; 10:2; 18:1-14; 20:45-47; 21:36; 22:40,46.

²⁰⁴ Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 90.

²⁰⁵ Scott, *Hear Then the Parables*, 465.

²⁰⁶ Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, 119.

²⁰⁷ Steven James, *Sharable Parables* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2005), 50.

²⁰⁸ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 121.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 120-21.

²¹⁰ William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminister, 1994), 200.

²¹¹ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 123. Also, Bailey discusses, in detail, how bread was used as a utensil.

The parable opens with a question that Luke employs frequently to initiate parables: “which one of you . . . ?”²¹² It is a rhetorical question that asks the hearer to imagine an unthinkable situation to which the expected response is an emphatic: “Impossible!”²¹³ In biblical times hospitality was a non-debatable obligation.²¹⁴

Those listening might very well react: “Indeed, it is an honor, not an annoyance, to be asked to contribute to an occasion that maintains the honor of the village; in doing so, the participants enhance the reputations of their families.”²¹⁵ In this parable one sees evidence of “the extravagant hospitality of the village and . . . the code of honor that sustains it.”²¹⁶ At the end of the parable the sleeper gives him “whatever he needs.”

Word Study

Anaideian. From *ναιδεία* [*anaideia* /an·ah·ee·die·ah/] noun. There is scholarly debate over the word that has been translated “persistence.” The debate centers on two problems: First, the word can mean “persistence,” but normally it would mean “shamelessness,” or perhaps a kind of impudent “brazeness.” Second, whose “shamelessness” would we be talking about? Does the word “his” refer to the desperate host or to the sleepy neighbor?²¹⁷ Bailey argues that the man requested to help is the one who has shamelessness. The reason he gets up to give his neighbor whatever he needs is

²¹² See also Luke 12:25; 14:5, 28; 15:4; 17:7.

²¹³ Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, 121.

²¹⁴ Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, 186.

²¹⁵ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 201.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 207.

²¹⁷ Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, 186.

that he wants to avoid the shame that would come to him if he refused. He is a man of integrity and he will not violate that quality.²¹⁸

Friend. φίλος [philos /fee·los/] adj. The word is used four times: in the introduction, in the requester's greeting to the sleeper, in the requester's description of the guest, and in the parable's conclusion. Friendship would appear to be a central value in the parable.²¹⁹ The word “friend” in the parable would have a particular resonance with members of the Jesus movement, where new networks of friends and fictive kin were constructed, with members who were willing to lay down their lives for one another out of friendship on the model of their leader who called them friends and not slaves (John 15:12-17).²²⁰

Snake. From φίς [ophis /of·is/] noun. There is little difference between the snake of the Sea of Galilee, which is a kind of fish that can reach five feet in length, and crawl on land.²²¹

Scorpion. From σκορπίος [skorpios /skor·pee·os/] noun. A scorpion is “a small crawling animal which looks like a flat lobster” and lives in the desert, hiding under rocks. When its appendages are folded in, it can look like an egg, but its painful and poisonous sting can bring death.²²²

Subject

How should we approach God in prayer?

²¹⁸ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 133.

²¹⁹ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 90.

²²⁰ Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, 125.

²²¹ E. W. G. Masterson, *Studies in Galilee* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), 49.

²²² Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 90, quoting from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, 62.

Complement

When we pray, we are like children approaching a loving Father who will only give us good things.

Surprise

Though Donahue implies that God wants us to be persistent, demanding his attention with “shameless boldness,”²²³ Bailey argues that the parable itself does not say the man persisted in anything.²²⁴ The key to the parable is the definition of the word *anaideia*. This word took on the meaning of “persistence.” It is here more appropriately translated “avoidance of shame,” a positive quality.²²⁵ The literary structure of the entire parable makes clear that this quality is to be applied to the sleeper. Hence, the parable tells of a sleeping neighbor who will indeed preserve his honor and grant the host’s request and more. If you are confident of having your needs met when you go to such a neighbor in the night, how much more can you rest assured when you take your requests to a loving Father?²²⁶ To hear the parable through the voice of the sleeper speaks of God’s love and generosity and not---as in the traditional interpretation---as though God seems grumpy and reluctant to meet the needs of his children.

²²³ John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 187.

²²⁴ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 128.

²²⁵ Ibid, 133. Shame is an extremely important quality in Eastern culture generally. Some areas of life are governed by law, but much of life is controlled by the “shame” (negative) that is avoided because of the individual’s inner “sense of shame” (positive). The first is negative and is to be avoided at all costs; the second is positive and is to be encouraged. The importance of the concept of shame in the East is partially indicated in that there are special words for “shame” and other quite different words that mean “sense of shame.” Jeremias refers to one of the weighty Semitic words referring to “a sense of shame” (*kissuf*), which he connects to this parable.

²²⁶ Ibid., 133.

Exegetical Outline

- I. Jesus teaches the disciples about prayer. (vv.1-4)
 - A. He gives them a model of how to pray.
- II. Jesus illustrates the right approach to prayer with a parable. (vv. 5-8)
 - A. A man has a guest who arrives unannounced in the middle of the night.
 - B. The man goes to his neighbor to borrow some bread to feed his guest.
 - C. After making excuses why he can't answer the call, the neighbor gives more than what is requested.
- III. Jesus instructs us how to pray about our needs. (vv. 9-10)
 - A. We ask God to meet our needs.
 - B. We anticipate that God will meet our needs.
- IV. Jesus tells an illustration of how a father naturally responds to his son. (vv. 11-13)
 - A. A father will not give his son what will harm him.
 - B. God will give better gifts to us.

Homiletical Possibility

- I. At times we are confused about how to pray and what to pray for.
 - A. It is helpful when we have a better understanding of the nature of our Heavenly Father. (vv.5-8)
 - B. God is never too busy to answer us.
 - C. God is not going to tell us we are a burden.
 - D. God does not have to be begged in order to get him to respond.

II. Now that we know God's character, we can confidently pray about our needs. (vv. 9-10)

A. We have a relationship with the Father so:

We continue to ask

B. We know God has what we need so:

We continue to seek

C. We believe God will answer us so:

We continue to knock

III. Since God is more faithful and loving than any earthly father, we should never be afraid of what we receive from God, who is perfect. (vv. 11-13)

A. An imperfect earthly father will naturally give his son whatever is best for him.

B. God, who is a perfect father, will give better gifts to us.

The Big Idea

God's answers to our prayers are good for us.

Parabolic Expository Sermon One

Good Answers from a Good Father Luke 11:5-13

Our prayer life often resembles a child's coloring. When children first start to color, they have two challenges. First, they don't know which colors are appropriate. My daughter has given me pictures of purple turtles, green clouds and red grass. Secondly, once the colors are chosen, children have a hard time staying within the lines.

In a similar way, as children of God, at times we don't know exactly what to pray for. And when we do pray, our prayers can be out of line with God's will.

It was this same kind of struggle that prompted the disciples to come to Jesus one day and ask, Lord, teach us to pray. They had seen and heard the Pharisees pray but there was a problem. Jesus had already warned them not to pray like the Pharisees. In Luke 11:5-13, however, it appears that the disciples are not asking so much for the mechanics of how to pray, but the secret of Jesus' prayer life. When Jesus prayed to his Father about anything, he answered. Wouldn't it be great to pray like Jesus and to have the same assurance he had when he prayed to the Father?

Well, let's see if that is possible. In Luke 11:5-13, Jesus begins teaching us about prayer. After sharing a model of prayer he knows that we, like the original disciples, will still have questions about prayer and struggle with praying. Jesus knows that there is a right approach to prayer and a wrong approach to prayer. So he begins teaching us about the nature of his Father by telling a story about a friend that is approached at midnight by a friend.

Listen to what he says in verses 5-8:

⁵Then he said to them, “suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, “friend, lend me three loaves of bread,”⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.”

⁷”Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

What is the nature of God the Father?

God is not like the man. First of all, the man who finally responds to his friend’s request has done out of shamelessness what he ought to have done out of honor. The man makes silly excuses about the children being asleep, the door being locked and wishes his sleep would not have been disturbed. God is never too busy to hear us when we pray.

Second, the sleeper is bothered by this midnight call. It is never an inconvenience, however, for God. God never sleeps nor does he slumber.

Next, God is not a God who sees his children’s request as burdens that he has to address. The sleeper responds but not cheerfully and spirited. If we delight ourselves in Him he will give us the desires of our hearts.

And then, we must not see prayer as having to continuously beg God to get him to respond.

One of the keys to answered prayer is having a relationship with God and knowing God’s nature. In a poem, Nancy Spiegelberg all but wishes she knew God better:

Lord, I crawled across the barreness to you with my empty cup;
Uncertain in asking any small drop of refreshment.
If only I had known you better I’d come running with a bucket!

Bill Gates, when he was the chief executive at Microsoft, was hooked up to the international computer network called Internet. Subscribers to the Internet could send through their computers electronic mail to other users of the Internet. Bill Gates had an e-mail address just like everyone. But then the New Yorker magazine published his e-mail address. Anyone could send the computer genius a letter. In no time Bill Gates was swamped with five thousand messages. It was more than any human could handle. So Gates armed his computer with software that filtered through his e-mail, allowing important messages through and sending others letters to electronic oblivion.

People are limited. They can handle only so much communication and offer only so much help. God, on the other hand, never tires of s-mail or spiritual mail. His ear is always open to our prayers. And he has unlimited capacity to help.²²⁷

Next, Jesus encourages us how to pray about our needs.

In verses 9-10 he says:

⁹"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Have you ever noticed what most of us do when we get on the elevator? Though the button is already lighted we press it. It comes automatic. In a similar way, praying to God continuously is what believers do. We pray to God about our needs because he is our Father and we are his children. We depend upon him to supply our needs.

Also, we do not have to doubt that he has what we need. We know that the earth is God's and everything in it. He has everything that we need.

²²⁷ Craig Larson, *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2002), 547.

As his children, we know he hears us and will answer if it is his will. We keep praying to him because it is him and him alone we desire to hear from.

We are encouraged to keep in constant communion with God. God wants us to be at rest about our prayer request. Our prayers are made to a loving God, so we can sleep at night.

We should see prayer as our first response, not our last.

Now, to show us why we should never be afraid of the answer that God gives to us, Jesus talks about how an earthly father naturally responds to his son's request.

Listen to verses 11-13:

¹¹"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

At this point in the parable, Jesus clearly applies what is called the Jewish rule of contrasts.²²⁸ It is the rule that points to the greater by teaching the lesser. An imperfect father will not give his child something that will harm him. In the Sea of Galilee there were fish that could pass as snake. The father would be careful in what he gives his child. The scorpion, when it is folded, looks like an egg. Again the father will not give his son something as deadly and poisonous as a scorpion.

So a father, who is innately evil, yet knows how to give good things to his children. How much more, says Jesus, will God, who is perfect, holy, loving, merciful, kind, and generous, give good gifts to his children! Jesus teaches that we never need to be

²²⁸ H. L. Stack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Meridian, 1969), 93-94.

afraid of the answers that God gives. As a child of God, when we pray to God it is kind of like calling home everyday. We should look forward to talking with our God.

Conclusion

God's answers to our prayers are good for us. No matter how he answers it's a good answer. The poem entitled "I asked," sums it up:

I asked God for all things that I might enjoy life,

He gave me life that I might enjoy all things.

I asked God for perfect health that I might do great things,

He gave me grace that I might do better things.

I asked God for power that I might have the praise of men,

He gave me weakness that I might feel the need for his power.

I asked God for riches that I might be happy,

He gave me enough that I might trust him.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve,

He made me weak that I might obey.

I received nothing I had asked for,

He gave me all that I had hoped for.²²⁹

The Hermeneutical Possibility

The 1st Century points of reference in the parable are the sleeper and the man at the door. As the audience (disciples) heard the story it would have immediately identified with the sleeper ultimately giving his neighbor or friend more than he asked for. It was

²²⁹ Henry J. Viscarte, www.jesuits.ca/orientations/bob/page6.htm

customary to extend extravagant hospitality. The sleeper knew that his response represented the entire community.

The audience knew that the man at the door knew that he would not be turned away. He simply calls out.

The 21st Century preacher can use a similar scenario for his/her audience to achieve the parable's affect. Steven James, in *Sharable Parables*, offers new points of reference for the 21st Century listener. In James' rendition of the parable, Al, like God, can always be counted on to respond to our needs. The narrator is like the sleeper who is awakened in the middle of the night. The guest (Billy Bob) comes in the middle of the night. A modernized version of Luke 11: 5-13 could be presented in the following manner. The passage has been read to the congregation.

21st Century Version of the 1st Century Parable

You Can Count on Al!

(A Monologue of “The Friend in the Night”)
by Steven James

(Walk up front carrying two grocery bags. Pull out stuff to make some sandwiches--such as a long piece of unsliced French bread, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, mayo, a serrated knife, etc.)

So there I am, getting ready for bed, when I hear a knock at my door. And I'm thinkin', "Who can that be knocking at my door? Go away. Don't come 'round here no more..."

(begin making your sandwich by cutting the bread in half lengthwise as you talk)

But the knocking continues, so I open up the door, and it's my old friend Billy Bob from out of town.

"Hey, Billy Bob!"

(as Billy Bob) "Yo."

And I'm like, "C'mon in, Billy Bob. I'll get you some supper."

And Billy Bob was like, "Yo!"

(continue making your sandwich)

But then I look around, and I realize I'm out of food. Not a bite to eat in the whole place.

And let me tell you, Billy Bob can eat! He eats so much we usually call him Billy Bib! So I think to myself, Where am I gonna get food at this time of night? All the stores are closed ... but then, I remember my pal Al.

He's always come through for me in the past. So I figure he'll help us. If anyone will, Al will.

"Let's go to Al's," I said. "You can count on Al."

And Billy Bob was like, *(as Billy Bob)* "Yo."

(add more stuff to your sandwich)

So, I go over and knock on Al's door until I wake him up. "Hey, lemme borrow three loves of bread!" I yell.

He's like, "It's late."

"I know!" I say. "But Billy Bob just showed up! And he's hungry!"

"You mean Billy Bib?"

(as narrator) "Yup."

(as Billy Bob) "Yo."

(as Al) "Oh."

Al didn't say anything for a while, but I knew he'd come through. Then, suddenly, he disappears into the house, and a few seconds later, this loaf of bread *(hold up the bread)* comes sailing out the window and hits me on the head.

(rub your head) "Ow."

(as Billy Bob) "Yo!"

(as Al) "Wait, did you say three loaves?"

"Yup."

(as Al) "Why three?"

"Billy Bob, remember?"

(as Al) "Oh, yeah."

And then, two more loaves come flyin' out.

(as Billy Bob) "Yo! ... Yo!"

(start closing up the jar of mayo and putting stuff away)

So Al came through for us, just like I knew he would. He's that kind of guy. You can count on Al ...

Well, I gotta go. Billy Bob's waiting for his sandwich. He already ate those other two loaves.

(Cut your sandwich in two slices, one tiny one and one huge one. Hold up the small one.)

This one's for me.

(hold up the huge one) And this one's for Billy Bob.

(as Billy Bob) "Yo ... I mean ... Yummy!"

So, anyway, if you don't have a friend like Al, you should. He's the best friend a guy could have. Everyone needs a friend like Al. You can count on Al.

(pause for a moment)

In a greater way, you can count on God to supply your needs. The main idea of the story of the Friend in the Night is never think that God is too busy for you or that he doesn't want to hear about your needs.

(Say the main idea and walk offstage munching on your sandwich)²³⁰

²³⁰ James, Steven, *Sharable Parables*, (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2005), 56-57.

Parable Two

The Prodigal Son Luke 15: 11-32

Text

¹¹Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

²⁵Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

²⁷“Your brother has come, he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All this years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!’

³¹“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

The Type of Literary Structure of the Text

Luke 15:11-32 is a double parable using the parabolic ballad (Type D). Each half has its own structure. The two halves are similar yet different.²³¹ The structure is as follows:

²³¹ Bailey Poet and Peasant, 158-59.

- A There was a man who had two sons
- 1 and the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.”
And he divided *his living* between them.
- 2 Not many days later the younger son sold all he had, journeyed into a far country and wasted *his property* in extravagant living,
- 3 And when he had spent everything a great famine arose in that country and he began to be *in want*.
- 4 So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country and he sent him to his fields *to feed pigs*.
- 5 And he would gladly have eaten the pods which the pigs ate and no one gave him *anything*.
- 6 But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s servants have bread to spare but I perish here with *hunger*.
- 6’ “I will arise and go to my father and say to him, ‘Father, AN INITIAL I have sinned against heaven and before you And am no more worthy to be called your son; **make me a servant.”**
- 5’ And he arose and came to his father.
And while he was at a great distance his father saw him and **had compassion** and ran and embraced him and kissed him.
- 4’ And the son said to the father, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you And am **no more worthy** to be called your son.”
- 3’ And the father said to the servants, “Bring the best **robe** and put it on him and put a **ring** on his hands and **shoes** on his feet.
- 2’ And bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and **make merry**,
- 1’ for this my son was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found.”
And they **began to make merry**.
- B Now the elder son was in the fields
- 1 and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing and he called one of the boys and asked what this meant.
- 2 And he said to him, “Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he received him with peace.”
- A SON IS LOST
- GOODS WASTED IN EXPENSIVE LIVING
- EVERYTHING LOST
- THE GREAT SIN (FEEDING PIGS) (FOR GENTILES)
- TOTAL REJECTION
- A CHANGE OF MIND
- REPENTANCE
- TOTAL ACCEPTANCE
- REPENTANCE
- THE GREAT REPENTANCE
- EVERYTHING GAINED RESTORED TO SONSHIP
- GOODS USED IN JOYFUL CELEBRATION
- A SON IS FOUND
- HE COMES
- YOUR BROTHER—SAFE A FEAST

- 3 But he was angry and refused to go in
 so his father came out
 and was entreating him.
- A FATHER COMES
 TO RECONCILE
- But he answered his father, “Lo these many years *I have served you and I have never disobeyed your commandments yet you never gave me a kid to make merry with my friends.*
- COMPLAINT I
 (HOW YOU TREAT ME)
- 4’ “But when *this son of yours* came
 who has *devoured your living with harlots you killed for him the fatted calf.*”
- COMPLAINT II
 (HOW YOU TREAT HIM)
- 3’ And he said to him, “Beloved son,
 you are always with me
 and all that is mine is yours.
- A FATHER TRIES
 TO RECONCILE
- 2’ “It was fitting to make merry and be glad
 for this your brother was dead and is alive,
 he was lost and is found.”
- YOUR BROTHER--SAFE
 A FEAST

The Position of the Parable within the wider Text

This is one of the best known and most loved parables of Jesus. It presents a vignette of first century family conflicts and their unexpected resolutions that still offers contemporary Christians patterns of restoring ruptured family and community relationships.²³² Like all parables, it begins with a common situation.

Some modern scholars feel that the setting given to the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Sons is secondary and yet historically accurate.²³³ Jeremias, on the other hand, argues that Luke 15:1-3 is a part of the Evangelist’s source and not the product of his redactional efforts.²³⁴ Jeremias also understands the introduction to be historically accurate, so that the *Sitz im Leben* of this set of parables is not the presentation of the

²³² Reid, *Parables for Preaching*, 57.

²³³ Dodd, *Parables*, 193; Linnemann, *Parables*, 69.

²³⁴ Jeremias, *Parables*, 100.

gospel so much as the “defense and vindication of the gospel.”²³⁵ Jeremias’ point is clearly affirmed in verses 2 and 3. Jesus is presented as defending his association with sinners.²³⁶ His actions are well in line with God’s, as Ernst puts it, *Die Sorge Gottes um das Verlorene* ---“the care of God for the lost.”²³⁷

Title

The most common title of this parable is The Prodigal Son. Bailey calls it The Father and the Two Lost Sons.²³⁸ Scott labels it A Man Had Two Sons.²³⁹ Blomberg names it The Prodigal Sons and Their Father.²⁴⁰ Jones gives it the title, The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother.²⁴¹

Cultural Factors

In the East today, as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of lesser needy persons as a sign of his generosity, but he does *not* eat with them.²⁴² However, when guests are “received” the one receiving the guests eats with them. The meal is a special sign of acceptance. The host affirms this by showering his guests with a long series of compliments to which the guests must respond. Jesus is set forth in the text as engaging in some such social relationship with publicans and sinners. Small wonder the Pharisees were upset.²⁴³

²³⁵ Ibid., 124.

²³⁶ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 142.

²³⁷ Josef Ernest, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet 1976), 450.

²³⁸ Ibid., 158.

²³⁹ Scott, *Hear Then the Parables*, 465.

²⁴⁰ Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 33.

²⁴¹ Peter R Jones, *Studying The Parables of Jesus*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Pub. Inc. 1999), 215.

²⁴² Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 143. Italics are the authors.

²⁴³ Ibid., 143. A rabbinic injunction stated, “The wise way, ‘Let not a man associate with sinners even to bring them near to the Torah’ “ (*Mechilta* 57b on Exod. 18:1; quoted from Montefiore, *Rabbinic*, 335).

The parable begins with the younger of the two sons making an unimaginable request. Bailey comments that for over fifteen years he has asked people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father was still living. The answer, says Bailey, has almost always been emphatically the same.²⁴⁴ Levison writes, "There is no law or custom among the Jews or Arabs which entitles the son to a share of the father's wealth while the father is still alive."²⁴⁵

The prodigal's actions are all the more remarkable because his request is twofold. He requests the division of the inheritance while his father was in good health. In the Mishna the key passage is *Baba Bathra* viii. 7, which reads,

If one assign in writing his property to his children, he must write, "from today and after [my] death." . . . If one assign in writing his estate to his son [to become his] after his death, the father cannot sell it since it is conveyed to his son, and the son cannot sell it because it is under the father's control. . . . The father may pluck up [produce] and feed it to whomsoever he pleases, but whatever he left plucked up belongs to his heirs.²⁴⁶

To the phrase "after [my] death" the editor appends this note: "This refers to a healthy person who desires to retain the right to benefit from his possessions during his lifetime."²⁴⁷ Jeremias and others have accepted this passage as being the best explanation of the legal situation behind the parable.²⁴⁸ The Babylonian Talmud has a note giving an

Jeremias points out that for the Pharisee, entertaining the non-Pharisee was "if not entirely forbidden, at least protected by very scrupulous limitations" (*Jerusalem*, 267).

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 161.

²⁴⁵ N. Levison, *The Parables: Their Background and Local Setting*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1926), 156.

²⁴⁶ In Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 163. *Order Nezokin*, Vol. IV in *Mishnayoth*, trans. and ed. Philip Blackman (London: Mishna Press, 1954), 212.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 163.

²⁴⁸ Jeremias, *Parables*, 128.

illustration of the kind of situation in which a man in good health might sign his estate over to his sons. The note explains the Mishna quoted above and reads,

i.e., a person in good health who desired, for example, to marry a second time, and wished to protect the sons that were born from his first marriage from the possible seizure of his estate by his second wife, in payment of her *kethubah*.²⁴⁹

So for special circumstances the Mishna provides for the willing over of one's inheritance before death, but there is no hint of any father having done so under pressure from a younger son.

The second reason the son's request is remarkable is because it is granted. But this gives him ownership without the right to dispose of his share. The property is his but he cannot sell it. He wants more, so he pressures his father into granting him full disposition immediately.²⁵⁰ The Mishna quoted above provides for the legal settlement, but not for disposition by the sons during the father's lifetime. After signing over his possessions to his sons the father still has the right to live off the proceeds as long as he is alive.²⁵¹ Here the younger son gets, and thus is assumed to have demanded, disposition to which, even more explicitly, he had no right until the death of his father. The implication of "Father, I cannot wait for you to die" underlies both requests. It is even stronger in the second.²⁵²

Some scholars argue that the scandal (the son's request) does not lie so much in the request itself as in the son's liquidation of the property and squandering of it.²⁵³ A

²⁴⁹ In Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*. 164. *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin, Baba Bathra II*, tran. and ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), 573, n. 1.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 129.

family's property had to maintain its oldest members for life. Whatever a son may have received before his parents' deaths would have to be managed responsibly for their sakes. Either in demanding his inheritance or in dissipating it, most likely in both, the younger son commits a kind of patricide.²⁵⁴

Word Study

Property. From **οὐσία** [ousia /oo·see·ah/] noun. The demand was for the “property” (*ousias*), but the father’s compliance is stated in different terms: “he divided between them his living”—his life (*bion*).²⁵⁵

Pods. From **κεράτιον** [keration /ker·at·ee·on/] noun. Pods---a food associated with the pod of a carob tree---were “sometimes described as the food of the poor.”²⁵⁶ They were “black bitter berries growing on low shrubs and containing very little nutritional value,”²⁵⁷ illustrating the extreme poverty of the younger son.²⁵⁸

Hired Hand. **μισθίος** [misthios /mis·thee·os/] adj. The term comes from the Greek *mishos*. It refers to the status of a day laborer, an unstable position, dependent upon irregularly available work.²⁵⁹

Trecho. From **τρέχω** [trecho /trekh·o/] verb. Jesus’ use of this word in describing the father running to meet the son “implies straining to the utmost.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁴ Duke, *The Parables*, 90.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 145.

²⁵⁷ Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, 218.

²⁵⁸ Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 111.

²⁵⁹ Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 76-77.

²⁶⁰ George V. Shillington., *Jesus and His Parables*, (Scotland: T & T Clark 1997), 156.

Katephilesen. From καταφιλέω [*kataphileo* /kat·af·ee·leh·o/] verb. The verb for the kiss is an intensified form, conveying great passion.²⁶¹ Never. The word “never” (*oudepote*) stresses the uniqueness or conclusiveness of a statement, and contextually here accentuates the disparity and the cause of the hurt feelings. It also reflects the understanding of sonship on the part of the elder brother.²⁶²

Subject

How does God love us?

Complement

God loves each of us as though there were only one of us.

Surprise

The surprise element is found in the cultural shocks and the inappropriate behavior of the two sons and the father. Nothing in this parable makes cultural sense to the Middle Eastern mind.²⁶³

Beginning with the audacity of the younger son, who asks his father for his inheritance, the parable continues with the older brother doing nothing. The audience would have expected him at least to initiate diplomacy, but that does not happen. The older son’s silence indicates a rejection of his responsibility to reconcile his brother to his father.²⁶⁴ Though granting such a request is exceptional, the father gives the younger son his inheritance and he goes off, of all places, to a Gentile city, where he loses everything and ends his trip feeding swine.

²⁶¹ Duke, *The Parables*, 92.

²⁶² Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, 220.

²⁶³ Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 113.

²⁶⁴ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 161.

When the son returned to the village, the father breaks into a run. Mothers might run to their children; fathers did not. He must hike up his long robe, show his flying legs and look foolish to all.²⁶⁵ The father kisses him as a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. He then orders the servants to dress his son with his robe, which assures proper respect from the servants, who naturally are eagerly awaiting some clue from the father to tell them how they should treat the son.²⁶⁶ The servants are told to place a ring on his finger, which means that he is trusted in a remarkable way and has been completely restored,²⁶⁷ shoes on his feet, which are a sign that they accept him as their master,²⁶⁸ and kill the fattened calf, which means the entire village is invited to the celebration.²⁶⁹ In this public visible demonstration of unexpected love the father is just as earnestly searching for his son as the shepherd and the woman searched for what they had lost.²⁷⁰ The surprise continues with the older son refusal to serve as host at the celebration.²⁷¹ The final shock of the parable is the father going out to the older son, entreating him to rejoice with him but it apparently has no affect on him.²⁷²

²⁶⁵ Jermias, *Parables of Jesus*, 130; Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 181; Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 155. Scott says the father's response has "the quality of burlesque" (*Hear Then the Parable*, 117).

²⁶⁶ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 184-85.

²⁶⁷ J.D. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 66.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 186.

²⁷⁰ Linnemann, *Parables*, 77.

²⁷¹ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 194. At such a banquet the older son has a special semi-official responsibility. He is expected to move among the guests, offering compliments, making sure everyone has enough to eat, ordering the servants around and, in general, becoming a sort of major-domo of the feast. The custom is widespread all across the Arab world and on into Iran, where in the village the older son stands at the door barefoot to greet the guests. Part of the meaning of the custom is the symbolic nature of the gesture, by which the father says, "My older son is your servant."

²⁷² Ibid. 196. Bailey lists seven ways the older son attacks the integrity of the father. The father is expected to be furious. Rather there is an outpouring of love. There is no judgment, no criticism, no rejection, but only an outpouring of love.

Exegetical Outline

- I. The younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance (vv. 11-16).
 - A. The son takes his inheritance and heads to a Gentile town.
 - B. He loses everything and hits rock-bottom.
 - C. He is desperate and ends up with a job feeding pigs.
- II. The son realizes how bad things are and decides to go home (vv. 17-24).
 - A. The son, hungry, broke and dirty, returns to his father.
 - B. He prepares a speech of repentance.
 - C. He will beg his father to make him a hired servant.
 - D. His father runs to him and embraces him.
 - E. The father calls for a celebration, proclaiming the return of his son.
- III. The older brother hears the celebration but refuses to go inside (vv. 24- 32)
 - A. The father leaves the party to invite his son inside.
 - B. The son is angry and accuses his father of being unfair.
 - C. The father informs the son that everything he has is his and declares why the celebration is needful.

Homiletical Possibility

- I. Good parents, like God, know when to parent each child differently. This is good news for us.
 - A. This is good news because at times we are prone to walk away from a good thing, but God is always ready to welcome us back.
 - B. Once we come back to God, he confirms that he is happy for our return.
 - C. He restores the relationship.

D. He reminds others that our position in the family has not changed.

Then he calls for a celebration and invites everyone.

II. However, everyone may not come to the celebration. Some may feel that they have been cheated.

A. God is concerned about our feelings and reaches out to us.

B. He speaks to us tenderly.

C. He reminds us that we have not lost anything from him.

Then he pleads with us to join him in celebrating the good news about our sisters and brothers return.

Big Idea

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.

Parabolic Expository Sermon Two

God Goes All-Out for All Luke 15:11-32

Good parents, like God, know when to parent each child differently. Bishop Roy Nichols tells about a young woman who went to see a psychiatrist. His story becomes a kind of modern parable. The doctor determined early in the interview that she was a wife and mother of three children. As a critical start, he asked, “Which of your three children do you love the most?” Immediately she responded, “I love all three of my children the same.” He waited a moment. The answer seemed to come too quickly. He probed further: “Come now, you love all three children the same?” “Yes, that’s right,” she answered, “I love all of them the same.” Now impatient he reacted, “Come off it now! It is psychologically impossible for anyone to regard any three human beings exactly the same. If you’re not willing to level with me, we’ll have to terminate this session.”

The young woman broke up and cried. “All right, I do not love all three of my children the same,’ she admitted. “When one of my three is sick, I love that child more. When one of my three children is confused, I love that child more. When one of my three children is in pain, or lost, I love that child more. When one of my children is bad and I don’t mean naughty, I mean really bad, I love that child more.” Then she concluded, “But except for those exceptions, I do love all three of my children about the same.”²⁷³

In a similar, though more profound way, God loves each of us as if there were only one of us. This is good news. It is good news because we may or may not be like the younger brother or like the older brother, but we all are still in need of God’s amazing

²⁷³ George Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 74.

grace. God, like the father in the story, goes all out for both sons. Notice how he responds to the first son, who chooses to leave his father's house (20a-24).

The younger son has had it. Maybe he got tired of his parents telling him what to do. He despised working on the family farm with his father and brother. As he sweat in the fields each day, from sun up to sun down, he began thinking about how much he would like to get away from the country life to the city life. Finally he asked for money from his father and left home.

When he made it to the city, his first stop was the bar. As soon as he walked in, he shouted, "Drinks on me!" You can guess what happens next. He goes from buying drinks to buying women to gambling. After days of living like that his money runs out and so does his new friends. That's when the fun stops.

The younger son soon found himself in big trouble. Food was scarce and he became hungry. So, now, humiliated and destitute, he looks for a job. The only one who was hiring at the time was a pig herder. He takes the job and before he could get paid to purchase food he acquires a taste for pig food. That's when he realized he had left a good thing for a bad thing. He began thinking about his father, who had been so good to him. Maybe, just maybe, his dad would give him a job on the farm without pay. He made his mind up and began the long, slow journey home to beg his father to forgive him for doing such a stupid thing. But when his father saw him coming down the road, he ran, threw his arms around him and kissed his son. The wayward son is not expecting what the father does next. The father goes way out for his son!

At first glance we are baffled at the father's action in this story. He appears almost "wimpy" in indulging the younger son. Why didn't he put him off at least until the boy's

passions had subsided a bit? Why didn't the father have the servants "set up another pad in the servants' quarters" and put the son on probation for a while?²⁷⁴ The father seemed too ready to receive him with open arms like a returning war hero from Iraq. The father gives his son far more than he expected. He gives him the "best robe" signifying honor and reconciliation; the "ring" means restored authority, and the "sandals," a symbol of sonship rather than servanthood.²⁷⁵ A preacher reminding his hearers that the prodigal son returning home applied for a job as servant, the father responded, "No servant shortage. What I need is a son." Then he says, fire up the grill, kill fatten calf and invite everybody over!

If the father seems almost beside himself in lavishing such love on his son, the occasion required it, as Jesus says in verse 32.

Several years ago such a joyous event occurred in the rescue of a little girl from a narrow well in Midland, Texas. Having fallen twenty-two feet into the shaft, she lay immobile for fifty-eight hours while crews drilled through rock to get under her, and the world watched and waited. When the paramedics finally were able to follow the drillers to bring her up, all the major TV networks interrupted their programming to show the completion of the heroic effort and the "resurrection" of the little tot. She instantly became the adopted little darling of every home. The whole world rejoiced at her safe return, and congratulatory gifts inundated the home from everywhere. That is what happens in heaven every time a lost sinner is returned to the Father through Jesus. All heaven rejoices!²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Jones. In *Preaching* Volume 23, no. 1. page 62.

²⁷⁵ Ellisen, *Parables in the Eye of the Storm*, 179.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 181.

Many of us like God and even believe in God because of this very story. We can meet a God even better than we expected. We overturn with this parable any childhood pictures of God as a vengeful deity, a domineering God that crowds us, or a heavenly policeman or a harsh parent.²⁷⁷ The good news is that you can approach God even when you have blown it big time!

Wow! What a response! How could anyone refuse to join in on such an extravagant celebration?

Henri Nouwen tells of visiting the Hermitage and spending hours before Rembrandt's famous rendition of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. On the full canvas may also be seen the elder brother. He is portrayed as the main observer of the homecoming of the Prodigal. This main observer looks rather withdrawn. Through he looks at his father, it is not with joy. There is no reaching, no welcome, no smile.²⁷⁸

Realizing the complexity of the reunion, Nouwen noticed how the tall, stern elder brother dominated the right side of the painting. He observed how the large open space separating the father and the elder brother created a tension asking for resolution.²⁷⁹ Let's see if the father, who goes all out for the younger son when he returns home, responds to the older brother, who refuses to come inside the celebration, is the same (25-32).

As we pick up with the next part of the story, some of us recognize ourselves in the older brother. We grew up as oldest children expected to be model daughters and sons, wanting to please. Unlike our younger siblings, we didn't have time to have fun. We were too busy being responsible. As a result, some of us did not live a free life in our

²⁷⁷ Jones. In *Preaching* Volume 23, no. 1. page 62.

²⁷⁸ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 63-64.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 64.

parent's house.²⁸⁰ Recognizing that we can be lost while still at home, Nouwen speaks of the lostness as "characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy."²⁸¹

You know the story. To his surprise, the older brother hears the throbbing of the music and chanting of the dancers. He asks one of the servants, "what's going on in the house?" He's told that his father had killed the fattened calf because his little brother had come home. The older son turns indignant, refusing to have any parts in the celebration. He pouts. He is aggravated and agitated.

Since the older boy will not come in, the father will go out to him. As he goes all out for the younger son he goes all out for the older too.

He pleads continuously with him. However, in response to his father, he publicly disrespects his father and disclaims his brother. He accuses his father of showing favoritism and not considering his years of loyalty, goodness, and obedience.

The father, however, lovingly responds to the hostility directed at him (vv. 31-32). The father, first, calls him his "child." This father will not disown either one of his sons. He reaches out for the older son as he did the younger. Then, he sympathetically responds to his son's feelings. He affirms that the reception of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older son (You are always with me). Also, the older son thought that he had lost something when the father gave the son his inheritance. He was so bothered by what the younger son had lost that he had not bothered to count what he had been given. The older son, like the younger son, was the recipient of grace.

²⁸⁰ Jones, In *Preaching* Volume 23, no. 1. page 62

²⁸¹ Ibid., 66.

In our story we see a father loving both sons. Both sons were selfish in their own way. The younger son wanted what was his before it was time to receive it and the older son was only thinking about what he did not get. Yet the father was selfless. He gave each son more than they expected.²⁸² What amazing grace! The Apostle John noted, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). What a God! He loves each of us as if there were only one of us!

Hermeneutical Possibility

The 1st Century parable points of reference are the father and two sons. Here again, where one sat determined how one heard, but in either case the point is the same: God not only freely forgives the lost but accepts them with great joy. For those who consider themselves righteous reveal themselves to be unrighteous if they do not share the father’s and the lost son’s joy.²⁸³ The force of the parable, however, is in the attitude of the second son. He failed to share the father’s love for his lost brother.

The 21st Century preacher can create new points of reference for the modern listener. In a modernized version of the parable I chose to tell it from the view of the older brother. Over the years I have been unable to understand my mother’s patience and unconditional love for my wayward brother. On several occasions I have questioned her at great length. In the sermon she is like the loving father, my brother (Fred) is similar to the careless younger son and I (my mother calls me Bird) am somewhat like the self-righteous older brother. In the parable, as the older brother never knew about his brother

²⁸² Jones. In *Preaching* Volume 23, no. 1. page 62.

²⁸³ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 156.

asking the father for forgiveness, so I never knew about the early morning confession from my brother to my mother.

What follows is a modernized version of the Prodigal Son.

21st Century Version of the 1st Century Parable

The Door at Momma's House Never Closes Luke 15:11-32

You know it's hard to figure out why God does certain things. The more I study the Bible the more I realize how much I do not know about God. I mean, just when I think I know how he will respond to a situation he responds in a way that is as far from my mind as the earth is from the heavens. God does not do things the way we think he should.

As I was thinking about how out-of-the-box God is, I thought about my mother, Ruby Dell Smith. I began to recall the many conversations my sister and brothers have had with her concerning why she continues to respond to our younger brother, Fred, as though he's the only child. If you knew what the family knows about how recklessly Fred has lived and how ungrateful he has been to Momma you would agree with us that her consistent, nonjudgmental response to him does not make sense.

[Shaking my head, back and forth]

You would not believe the many ways and number of times Fred has broken Momma's heart. You name it, he's done it----jail, drugs, alcohol, cursing at her, yelling at her. And how did Momma respond---she kept right on being Momma. He could come home no matter what he had done, he could call from anywhere at any hour of the night and she would accept the call. Regardless of how often my brothers, Rod, Mike, Steve, and sister, Sherry, attempted to convince her to stop letting him take advantage of her, she did her own thing. He could always come to Momma's house.

I was so frustrated about this that I called her last night. I said Momma, me, Rod, Mike, Steve, and Sherry have not caused you any heartache. We made good grades in

school, earned a good living, raised our families and remained in church, like you taught us to. Fred, however, has not done anything to make you feel proud. All I can remember is how much pain and shame he's caused you and us. Like the time he embarrassed me and my family. We had come home for Christmas. We had had a delicious dinner, opened gifts, talked about the old days and went to bed for the night. Then, at 3 o'clock in the morning, who stumbles in, talking loud and bumping into that table in the hall, Fred! Or how many times has he told you that tomorrow he would get a job. He has not been to church in years and is never around for the family dinners. Yet, no matter what he did you always made a spot for him at the table and kept the door of your house open for him. You have never told him that he had to go. Why have you done this? It does not make sense! I don't understand it!

[Taking a short pause and a few steps backward]

Well, Bird, you and Rod, Sherry, Mike and Steve are right about one thing. Your brother Fred has broken my heart more times than I can count. But not more times than I can forgive. What you all do not know is that late one night, after Fred had been gone for weeks, he returned home. He made his way down the hall, around that table, into my bedroom and knelt down on his knees beside my bed. Then he gently nudged me on my shoulder, saying, "Momma, Momma, you sleep? I was awake, like all the other nights, hoping and praying that he would come through that door at any moment. Though my heart was overjoyed, I did not say a word. He said, "Momma, I know I have hurt you so many times. I know I have made you ashamed of me. I have not done anything good with my life, like Bird, Rod, Sherry, Mike and Steve have. But Momma, I am so sorry! I have

never meant to hurt you! I'm sorry Momma! I am sorry Momma! That's all I wanted to say.”

[Taking a short pause and a few steps forward]

“So Bird, your brother is just like you. He’s my son, too. I love him as much as I love you. There is nothing that will ever or can ever change that”.

My mother’s love for my brother, though deep, is shallow when compared to God’s love for us. As Augustine said, God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love. This is one of the lessons that the parable of the prodigal son, which is found in Luke 15: 11-32, teaches us. The young man who ran away and began doing wrong things is like my brother Fred. After awhile of being away from home the young man realized how big of a mess he had made of his life and chose to go home. Like Fred made a heart-wrenching confession to mother, he made a confession to his father. His father was so glad to see him that he ran and threw his arms around him. The father held a great feast and took his son back, not as a servant, but as his son.

However, as I could not understand my mother’s nonjudgmental spirit and unconditional love for my reckless brother neither could the older brother in the story. But just as my mother confirmed her love for all her children so did the father for both sons. More than anything else, the parable about the Prodigal Son tells us about the great love of God for his children. God loves his children, as Peter R. Jones says, including disreputable sinners like the prodigal son and reputable sinners like the elder brother. And guess what? That includes you! So remember it and share it with others. His love is unlimited and unbiased, reminding us that there is no need for any of us to feel cheated because of what God is doing for our sister or brother.

Parable Three

The Dishonest Manager Luke 16: 1-13

Text

¹Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

³”The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg--- ⁴I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ ⁵”So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶”‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil, he replied. “The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’ ⁷”Then he asked the second, ‘and how much do you owe?’ “‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’ ⁸”The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰”Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹”So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹²”And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? ¹³”No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

The Type of Literary Structure of the Text

Luke 16:1-13 is carefully structured along the lines of a parabolic ballad (Type D). The structure is as follows:

A	There was a rich man who had a steward and charges were brought to him that he was wasting his goods.	RICH MAN—STEWARD STEWARD—A RASCAL
B	And he called him and <i>said</i> to him, “What is this I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship for you can no longer be steward.”	WHAT DOING? FIRED AS STEWARD OUT OF WORK
B	and the steward <i>said</i> to himself “What shall I do because my master is taking the stewardship away from me?”	DO WHAT? FIRED AS STEWARD

I am not strong enough to farm and ashamed to beg. OUT OF WORK

C "I know what I will do
so that when I am put out of the stewardship
they may receive me into their own houses." DO THIS
Fired as steward
New job

B' So summoning his master's debtors one by one DO—ACT LIKE A
he said to the first, "How much do you owe my master?" STEWARD
And he said, "A hundred measures of oil," WIN FAVOR
And he said to him, "Take your bill and sit down quickly and write fifty."

B' Then he *said* to another, "And how much do you owe?" DO—ACT LIKE A
And he said, "A hundred measures of wheat." STEWARD
And he said to him, "Take your bill and write eighty." WIN FAVOR

A' Then the master commended the dishonest steward
for his wisdom RICH MAN—STEWARD
because the sons of this age are wiser STEWARD A WISE RASCAL
than the sons of light in their own generation.

Luke 16:9-13

I. MAMMON AND GOD

I say
to you:

- A for yourselves make
- B friends
- C from mammon the unrighteous
- C' so that when it fails
- B' they may receive
- A' you into the eternal tents.

II. MAMMON AND TRUTH

D The one faithful in little
also in much is faithful

E and the one in little unfaithful
also in much unfaithful is.

If
therefore

F in the unrighteous mammon
faithful you are not

F' the TRUTH
who to you will entrust?

And
if E' in what is another's
 faithful you are not

D' the what-is-yours
 who will give to you?

III. MAMMON AND GOD

G No servant can serve two master.

H Either the one he hates
I and the other he loves
I' or the one he is devoted to
H' and the other he despises.

G' You cannot serve God and mammon.

The Position of the Parable within the wider Text

The parable is located within the Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27), in which Jesus is on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Although Jesus speaks the parable to his disciples (16:1), the Pharisees and the scribes have been present since 15:1-2, and the Pharisees are mentioned again as among the listeners in 16:14.²⁸⁴ The word “parable” is not mentioned in verse 1, but neither is it included in the parable of Lazarus except as a variant. Apparently Luke assumes that the word “parable” given in 15:3 is to cover the parables of chapter 16 as well.²⁸⁵

The parable has long been considered one of the most difficult to interpret.²⁸⁶ Warren Kissinger notes that there are about 36 different interpretations of it on record,

²⁸⁴ Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 146-47.

²⁸⁵ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 87. The Syriac, the Arabic Diatessaron, the Peshitta, and Ibn al-Tayyib add the word “parable” to this verse in their translations. Thus these translators clearly understood this text as a parable.

²⁸⁶ Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*, 228.

and lists more bibliographic entries for this parable (133) than any other, except for the Prodigal Son (254).²⁸⁷

The parable begins at 16:1, but where does it end? Here there are various proposals. (1) Although the parable may well end earlier, its application must be included within the same unit, which ends at 16:9 (“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes”).²⁸⁸ (2) The parable (16:1-8a) and its application (16:8b) are a unit, ending at 16:8.²⁸⁹ (3) The parable ends at 16:8a (“because he had acted shrewdly”), and all else that follows is secondary to it.²⁹⁰ (4) The parable ends at 16:7,²⁹¹ and 16:8a is already a comment attributed to Jesus that has been appended to the parable secondarily.²⁹²

Titles

The parable is most commonly called The Parable of the Unjust Steward. Others, however, call it the Crooked Manager,²⁹³ Crafty Steward,²⁹⁴ A Rich Man Had a Steward,²⁹⁵ and Unjust Manager.²⁹⁶

²⁸⁷ Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1979), 398-408.

²⁸⁸ Luke Plummer, 380, 386; J. Wansey, “Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 39-40.

²⁸⁹ A. Julicher, *Gleichnisreden*, 2:505; T. W. Manson, *Sayings*, 291-92; W. Oesterley, *Parables*, 198; J. Creed, *Luke*, 201-3; J. Jeremias, *Parables*, 182; I. H. Marshall, *Luke*, 621; E. Schwizer, *Luke*, 254, 256; K. Bailey, *Poet*, 107-9; M. Lee, “Wasteful Steward,” 520-28.

²⁹⁰ B. Smith, *Parables*, 110; D. Via, *Parables*, 156-57; J. Coutts, “Unjust Steward,” 54-60; Wilhelm Michaelis, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu: Eine Einführung*, 3rd., UCB 32 (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1956), 228-29; H. Hendrickx, *Parables*, 192-93; J. Donahue, *Parable*, 163; J. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1,105; H. Weder, *Gleichnisse*, 263-64; W. Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 518-32; J. Kloppenborg, “Dishonored Manager,” 474-95; D. Parrott, “Dishonest Steward,” 499-515; B. Scott, *Parable*, 258; R. Funk, *Five Gospels*, 358-59; W. Herzog, *Parables*, 236; T. Hoeren, “Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter,” 620-29; H. binder, “Missdeutbar oder eindeutig?” 41-49.

²⁹¹ R. Bultmann, HST 175; W. Michaelis, *Gleichnisse*, 228-29; N. Perrin, *Teaching*, 115; J. Crossan, *Parables*, 108-9.

²⁹² Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 148.

²⁹³ Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, 210.

Cultural Factors

Bailey argues, our need for a more precise understanding of the culture that informs the text is perhaps greater in this parable than in any other.²⁹⁷ The steward is called in and questioned. The implication is, “I have been hearing for a long time, and I am still hearing a steady stream of things about you.”²⁹⁸ Although the servant has been asked a simple question he remains silent. This silence is supremely significant in the Oriental context. The man is indirectly affirming: (1) I am guilty, (2) the master knows the truth; he knows I am guilty, (3) this master expects obedience; disobedience brings judgment, and (4) I cannot get my job back by offering excuses.²⁹⁹ Friedel wrote, “Had the steward anything to say in self-defense, he would say it now, but he confesses his guilt in the briefest form possible by saying nothing.³⁰⁰ In the conservative village today a steward is always fired on the spot.³⁰¹ The listener of the parable expects the steward to be silent after the first question, but after the steward is told, “You’re fired; turn in the books!” the listener expects a classic debate in which the steward loudly and insistently protests his innocence. But, to the amazement of all, the steward is silent again.³⁰²

The steward discovers at this point something else about his master that is supremely significant. He is fired but not jailed. The *Mishna* makes it quite clear that an

²⁹⁴ Ellisen, *Parables in the Eye of the Storm*, 183.

²⁹⁵ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 465.

²⁹⁶ Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 146.

²⁹⁷ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 86-87.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 97. According to Bailey, this line of question is the stock formula that a master almost always uses in such a context.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ L. M. Friedel, “*The Parable of the Unjust Steward*,” CBQ 3 (1941), 338.

³⁰¹ G. Horowitz, *The Spirit of Jewish Law*, (New York: Central Book, 1953), 542.

³⁰² Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 97.

agent was expected to pay for any loss of goods for which he was responsible. The steward can be tried and jailed. Rather, he is not even scolded. The master, under the circumstances, has been unusually merciful toward him.³⁰³ Thus, in one sense, this servant has experienced two aspects of his master's nature. He is a master who expects obedience and acts in judgment on the disobedient servant. He is also a master who shows unusual mercy and generosity even to a dishonest steward. The thoughtful listener of the parable would not miss either of these facts.³⁰⁴

At this point in the parable, the steward comes up with a plan to solve his problem. He considers digging, and begging, rejecting both because they are beneath his dignity. He decides to take a risk. The key to his situation is that no one yet knows he is fired. He knows, however, it is only a matter of time before all will find out. First he summons each debtor, one by one, reducing both accounts. If the debtors have any knowledge that he is not acting on the master behalf, they would not cooperate because they will be breaking faith with the master's in a very serious way, and the master will no longer rent land to them. This is one of the more significant cultural factors ignored by nearly all commentators.³⁰⁵ In his summary of social relationships evidenced in the parables of the rabbis, Rabbi Feldman comments on the relationship between the owner of the land and his renters. He writes, "Personal relations were often friendly---sometimes

³⁰³ The agent was liable for the loss of money or goods entrusted to him if he could not prove that they had been stolen; cf. Horowitz, *Jewish Law*, 552f. Horowitz also indicates that "his responsibility was broadly that of a bailee" (*ibid.*, 552), and at times the bailee was responsible even in the case of theft (*ibid.*, 518-526). In Matthew 8:23-35 servants are jailed for debts; how much more can a servant expect to be jailed for money irresponsibly wasted?

³⁰⁴ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 98.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

quite intimate.”³⁰⁶ It is clear that the debtors assume that the steward is still in authority and the master has authorized the bills.

The steward finishes his plan and delivers them to his master. The master knows full well that in the local village there has already started a great round of celebration in praise of him, the master, as the most noble and most generous man that ever rented land in their district.³⁰⁷ He has two alternatives. He can go back to the debtors and explain that it was all a mistake and that the steward had been dismissed, and thus his actions were null and void.³⁰⁸ But if the master does this now, the villagers’ joy will turn to anger, and he will be cursed for his stinginess. Second, he can keep silent, accept the praise that is even now being showered on him, and allow the clever steward to ride high on the wave of popular enthusiasm. This master is a generous man. He did not jail the steward earlier. To be generous is a primary quality of a nobleman in the East.³⁰⁹ The steward knew the master was generous and merciful. The character of the master in the story is crucial to interpreting the parable.

Word Study

Diabolos. From διαβάλλω [diaballo /dee·ab·al·lo/] verb. The verb for bringing charges, which means to accuse with hostile intent, either falsely or justly. The verb tells us only that the charges have a punitive outcome in mind.³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ A. Feldman, *The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1924, 2nd ed. 1927) 239.

³⁰⁷ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 101.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 102. Mishna *Gittin* iv. 1; Horowitz, *Jewish Law*, 542.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Duke, *The Parables*, 81.

Diaskorpizein. From διασκορπίζω [diaskorpizo /dee·as·kor·pid·zo/] verb. “Squandering” the owner’s property suggests anything from embezzlement to wasteful spending to incompetence.³¹¹ The wasting of the goods could imply that he had spent money on himself with total abandon.³¹²

Logon. From λόγος [logos /log·os/] noun. The master’s command is literally, “Give back the word [logon, in this case, “account”] of your stewardship.” Its most likely meaning is: turn in the books.³¹³

Oikonomos. From οἰκονόμος [oikonomos /oy·kon·om·os/] noun. The steward is a legal agent. He is paid.³¹⁴

Hakirin. From χρεοφειλέτης, χρεωφειλέτης [chreopheiletes /khreh·o·fi·let·ace/] noun. The debtors are *hakirin* who have rented land for which they must pay fixed amounts of produce.³¹⁵

Phronimos. From φρόνιμος [phronimos /fron·ee·mos/] adj. Clearly, for the Eastern fathers, there was no particular problem in using the Semitic word *hokmah*, “wisdom,” (verse 8a), in this context. The meaning in this context was the “cleverness and skill deployed in self-preservation. The steward is praised for his wisdom in knowing where his salvation lay, not for his dishonesty. He is sensitive to the hopelessness of his

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Crossan, J.D., *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1992), 109-10.

³¹³ Duke, *The Parables*, 82.

³¹⁴ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 91.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

situation. He is aware of the one source of salvation, namely, the generosity of his master.³¹⁶

Surprise

As an Oriental story, the parable builds to a climax awaiting the owner's response at the end of the parable. One of Bultmann's principles for the telling of a similitude is what he calls "the law of end stress."³¹⁷ Verse 8a when read as a part of the parable is an almost perfect example of this principle. It is almost universally conceded that Luke understood the master of verse 8 to be the rich man of verse 1. There seems to be no remaining argument to deter us from accepting Luke's judgment and reading verse 8a as the climax of the parable.³¹⁸ Many earlier commentators worried over how Jesus could use a dishonest man as an example. Bailey, on the other hand, feels otherwise. The Middle Eastern peasant at the bottom of the economic ladder finds such a parable pure delight. Nothing pleases him more than a story in which some David kills a Goliath.³¹⁹

Yet there is an unusual feature to this story. The storyteller in the East always has a series of stories about the clever fellow who won out over the "Mister Big" of his community. The remarkable feature of this parable is that the steward is criticized as "unrighteous" and called a "son of darkness." The average Oriental storyteller would not feel any compulsion to add such a corrective to this type of story. Thus, Bailey concludes, the Western listener/reader is surprised at the use of a dishonest man as a hero. The Easterner listener/reader is surprised that such a hero is criticized.³²⁰

³¹⁶ Ibid., 105-06.

³¹⁷ Bultmann, *Tradition*, 191.

³¹⁸ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 104-05.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

The parables of Jesus have a surprising list of unsavory characters. In addition to this steward are the unjust judge, the neighbor who does not want to be bothered in the night, and the man who pockets someone else's treasure by buying his field. As Smith notes,

The parable of the Unjust Steward, whose conduct goes from bad to worse, is only the most outstanding example of a class of parables, the use of which appears to be a unique and striking feature of Christ's teaching.³²¹

In the parable Jesus is using the rabbinic principle of "from the light to the heavy," which means generally, "how much more." That is, if this dishonest steward solved his problem by relying on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help you in your crisis when you trust his mercy.³²²

Subject

What are we to make of God's mercy?

Complement

God's mercy is constant.

Exegetical Outline

- I. The rich man has a conversation with the manager (vv. 1-2).
 - A. He asks him about the validity of the charges.
 - B. He commands him to turn in the books and fires him.
- II. The manager has a conversation with himself (vv. 3-4).
 - A. He considers two options: digging and begging.
 - B. He comes up with a plan.

³²¹ B. T. D. Smith, *The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1937), 109.

³²² Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 105.

- III. The manager summons two of his master's debtors (vv. 5-7).
 - A. He changes the first debtor's bill by fifty percent.
 - B. He changes the second debtor's bill by twenty percent.
- IV. The rich man commends the wisdom of the manager (v.8a).
 - A. He praised the wisdom of the manager knowing how to survive.

Homiletical Possibility

When we face the troubles of the world, the heartaches of life, the tough challenges of this existence, and the certainty of self-inflicted problems, what can we count on from God?

The parable in Luke 16 points us toward an answer.

- I. At times, the hardships that we face are the results of our being poor stewards of God's resources.
 - A. Our finances, health and families can be affected by poor stewardship.
- II. When this happens, we become desperate.
 - A. We try to make things better.
 - B. We call on people who we believe will help us.
- III. In our efforts to make things better, however, God wants us to know that he is reliable and we can turn to him for another chance.
 - A. He will be merciful.
 - B. He will forgive us of our poor stewardship.

Big Idea

You can't go wrong by trusting God to be merciful.

Parabolic Expository Sermon Three

What Can We Count on from God? Luke 16:1-8

There are so many things in this life that we just don't understand. We really don't understand disease. Why is a youngster perfectly healthy for sixteen years of his life and then just happens to be in a place where he suddenly encounters some germ or bacteria that invades his body and destroys it?

We don't understand accidents either. They are so random and indiscriminate. You start out a day that is like any other day, and then something happens in a matter of seconds, and life is forever different. You can never go back before that accident, Can you?

On and on we could go with our list of things we don't really understand.

Why is there so much pain in our world?

Why do good people suffer?

Why do we hurt one another?

Why can't people get along?

Now, all these difficult questions prompt us to raise yet another crucial question: When we face the troubles of the world, the heartaches of life, the challenges of this existence,³²³ and the certainty of self-inflicted problems, what can we count on from God?

The parable in Luke 16 points us toward an answer. At first glance, this parable is confusing to a lot of people. It does sound pretty strange when we first hear it. The

³²³ James Moore, *Jesus' Parable of Grace* (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2004), 51-52.

parable involves two people---a merciful rich man and a dishonest, desperate steward. In this story the dishonest steward discovered that his master had found out about his mismanagement. And so, he decided to risk everything on the mercy of his master and he was praised for it.

Now, let me pause for a moment. Jesus is not suggesting that God is like the rich man. Jesus is pointing out that God is as different from the rich man as day is from night. Jesus is not comparing them; he is contrasting them. In other words, Jesus is saying, “If this dishonest steward solved his problem by counting on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help you in your crisis when you trust his mercy.”

The setting of the parable is rural Israel, where a rich landowner had hired a manager or steward with authority to carry out the day-to-day business of the estate. The steward was wasting the master’s possessions. The rich man acted on the suspicion that the steward of his business affairs had wasted and embezzled his money.

According to the Bible’s teaching, all of us are stewards.³²⁴ The Bible teaches us that the earth belongs to God.³²⁵ We are his caretakers. As such, we are responsible for what we have and how we use it. Stewardship extends to many areas: the care of relationships between one another, the care for the physical world we live in, the care of the resources we’ve been entrusted with and care for the sanctity of life.

The day came, as it will for us, when the steward was called to the master and questioned regarding his stewardship (v. 2). The steward said no word in his defense. Apparently, the charges were true.

³²⁴ Genesis 2.

³²⁵ Psalm 24:1.

The time for us to give account to God of our stewardship is at hand. How are we caring for the environment we live in? How are we showing compassion for the poor? Are we being neighborly to all of our sisters and brothers, young and old? How are we caring for our body, mind, soul, and the resources, opportunities and talents we were given? What is our respond to God's call to accountability? Are we guilty, like this steward, of wasting and squandering God's belongings? If so, what do we do? Do we have another chance at doing what we should have done the first time?

Now panicking, the steward at first did not know what to do (v. 3). He contemplated his future. Who would hire him? He wasn't strong enough for manual labor and was too proud to beg. And so, he planned to risk everything on his understanding of the mercy of his master. His master showed mercy to the steward by only firing him (v.2). He could have sent the steward to jail too. The steward didn't receive a scolding from the master either.

So what is the steward's plan? Let's follow the drama to find out.

The key to his situation is that no one knows he is fired. Since they will find out soon enough, he has to act quickly (vv. 5-7). He called the debtors in one by one. He did not give a group discount, but made deals and favors person by person. He made people feel special. He wanted them to think he was their advocate and friend. He showed kindness and mercy to them. Most likely, he reduced the interest portion of the debts, a reduction that may have amounted to as much as 50 percent. Although the Mosaic Law forbade interest (except for loans to foreigners), there were always loopholes used by the many landlords. Understandably, the steward's action made him very popular. He hoped that in his own hour of need, the debtors would remember his kindness toward them.

The debtors had no clue that the steward was not empowered by the master to make the deals. If they had known, they would be breaking the master's trust, and he would no longer rent to them. The steward naturally took credit for having interceded on the debtor's behalf for the reduction of debts. He can quietly let it be known, "I talked the old gentlemen into it." We can easily reconstruct the kind of small talk that would have taken place during the bill changing. After all, he, the steward, was in the fields day after day. He knew that the rain was bad, the sun hot, and the worms active. The steward thus achieves the position of a factory foreman who has arranged a generous Christmas bonus for the workers. The bonus itself is from the owners. But the foreman is praised for having talked the owners into granting it.³²⁶ The plan was a stroke of genius.

The steward delivered the newly changed accounts to the master. The master contemplated his options on how to deal with this situation. He expected that the debtors were celebrating his generosity in the entire village. Word of mouth travels fast in a small village. The debtors would now portray the master as a generous and noble man. He had two options. He could tell the debtors the full story, but then his reputation would be hurt. His second option was to accept the situation. And so the rich man decided not to tell them it was a mistake and that their advocate was fired and under arrest. He reflected on his options, and praised his steward for his wisdom and cleverness. The master understood that the steward risked his life on the hope of his master's generous and merciful nature.

³²⁶ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 100.

Conclusion

On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In that game a young man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for UCLA. Picking up the loose ball, he lost his direction and ran sixty-five yards toward the wrong goal line. One of his teammates, Benny Lom, ran him down and tackled him just before he scored for the opposing team. Several plays later, the Bruins had to punt. Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, demoralizing the UCLA team.

The strange play came in the first half. At halftime the UCLA players filed off the field and into the dressing room. As others sat down on the benches and the floor, Riegels sat down in a corner, and put his face in his hands.

A football coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during halftime. That day Coach Price was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels. When the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before playing time, Coach Price looked at the team and said, "Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second." The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He didn't budge. The coach looked back and called to him. Riegels didn't move. Coach Price went over to where Riegels sat and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second." Roy Riegels looked up, his cheeks wet with tears. "Coach," he said, "I can't do it. I've ruined you. I've ruined the university's reputation. I've ruined myself. I can't face that crowd out there."

Coach Price reached out, put his hand on Riegels's shoulder, and said, "Roy, get up and go on back. The game is only half over. Riegels finally did get up. He went onto the field, and the fans saw him play hard and play well. All of us have, in some way or

another, run a long way in the wrong direction. But because of God's mercy, the game is only half over.³²⁷ You can count on God to show you mercy!

Hermeneutical Possibility

The 1st Century parable's points of reference are the master and the manager. The original listener could easily understand the cultural nuances of the relationships between landowners and stewards, landowners and debtors. A property manager was squandering his master's money. So far there is nothing unfamiliar in the story. He was called to produce accounts and knew his number was up, so to speak. He knew he was fired so he had to do something. He took a risk. Most of the hearers would be challenged with the urgency of the hour. In a similar way they are in the same position as the manager who saw imminent disaster and acted. As Duke declares, maybe in the parable Luke is inviting us to reflect on the steward as another case of a doomed squanderer who takes a prudent turn that is overwhelmed by impossible acclamation.³²⁸

The 21st Century listener is in the same predicament and therefore needs to hear the same message. As the manager's life was in a crisis as the result of his poor stewardship, today, many people are at their wits end due to their own or someone else's poor stewardship. Some of their troubles are associated with health, finances, and society in general, to name a few. Consequently, we need the Master's mercy, as did the manager in the parable.

As new points of reference, I chose to retell the parable from the experiences of a man named Dennis, who lived on the wild side. The story was originally told by John and

³²⁷ Edward Rowell, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1997), 79.

³²⁸ Duke, *The Parables*, 79.

Lynn Samaan, in “*Parables to Live By*.³²⁹ I changed the names in the story and how the main character came to the Lord to demonstrate the similarities of (Dennis) Kevin and the dishonest manager. As you read the story you will obviously make the connection between Kevin and the manager. However, the connection with the master and the chaplain is not so apparent. For the manager, the master was his source of mercy. I used the chaplain’s message as the source of Kevin hearing about God’s mercy.

³²⁹ Samaan, Lohn and Lynn, *Parables to Live By* (Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 74-77.

21st Century Version of the 1st Century Parable

Another Chance Luke 16:1-8

There once was a family from Ireland, who came to America. The family, like many others from various countries, came to America in pursuit of the American dream. But for them and their two children, Kevin and Carol, life would become more like a nightmare instead of the dream they had hoped for.

After a long period of unemployment and uncertainty, Kevin's parents lost hope and faith for a better life. Soon they both turned to alcohol and drugs and became addicts. So life from the beginning was hard. Sadly, things quickly got worse when his mom died while he was still very young, leaving him and his sister to be split up and sent to foster homes. In the foster homes he was sexually and emotionally abused. For Kevin, the world was not a safe place, and he began to think something must be wrong with him. The pain of abandonment stung, so he set up walls to keep from being hurt any more or to become close to anyone anymore. For various reasons, he was being shifted from foster home to foster home. Kevin was robbed of the feeling that he was loved, belonged or had anything to live for, and so he self-medicated with drugs and alcohol.

By the time he was in his early twenties he met his wife and had his own two children. Sadly, his first taste of belonging and family only lasted a short time. The nightmare-cycle began again as he watched his wife die in his arms from an overdose and stood helplessly by as his children were taken from him and placed into foster care. He joined a gang, looking for a place to belong, but soon found himself busted by the police and serving time in prison on several occasions. Over and over he tried detox programs, but nothing lasted. It was just a matter of time before he was using drugs again, living out

on the streets again, angry, empty inside, and isolated. Now in his late thirties, he is sick with AIDS.

After fourteen years of taking risks on the streets Kevin decided to take a risk with God. He'd heard about the mercy of God from the chaplain at the Rescue Mission. The chaplain's words were true and God had pity on Kevin. For the first time in his life he began to discover that God loved him as he is and offered him forgiveness and release from his guilt and shame. As a new Christian, he thrived as part of the family of God at the mission and quickly became a friend to others who were down and out. He found peace and purpose in God while being a blessing to the mission, cooking, driving the van, helping at the reception desk, and serving the guests who came at night into the overnight shelter.³³⁰

In the story you just heard Kevin was in some ways like the unjust steward in Jesus' parable. Kevin abused his mind and body. The manager misused what had been given to him. As a result, both men's lives were in crisis and in need of mercy. What did they do? They took the depravity of their situations deadly serious. Kevin turned to the Lord, and just as the chaplain had said, he found him to be merciful and forgiving. Likewise, the manager risked everything on his master's mercy and was spared. The point of the parable is if a sinful man like the master in the story can be trusted to show mercy, how much more we can trust God's generosity of mercy to us in our time of need. In the same way the man in the story knew his master would be merciful, we are to completely trust God's mercy, which is the true source of our salvation.

³³⁰ Ibid.

Seminar Outline:
A Three-Hour Seminar for Preachers
on Redressing the 1st Century Parable in 21st Century Garb

Seminar Description

The focus of the seminar was the Lukan parables of Jesus. Even though people of all ages, backgrounds, gender, and political affiliation, love stories, and the Christian church has the greatest story ever told, preachers often underestimate the relevance and power of Jesus' parables. Hence, the major purpose of the seminar was to take a fresh approach at this preaching tool and to grasp an understanding of how to expositationally preach and translate parables into a 21st context so that listeners will hear and apply the parable's principle in their lives.

I mailed 100 surveys to local pastors and preachers of the Wolverine Baptist State Convention and emailed 25 to my Doctor of Ministry colleagues. My goal was to have 50 of the 100 area preachers to complete the survey and attend the seminar. 64 of them completed the survey and 34 attended the free, one-day, three hour seminar. One of the seven questions was: For you, what is the most challenging aspect of preaching a parable today? By far, 90% to be precise, most preachers admitted their struggle with making the parable relevant to today's listener. Therefore, the three-hour seminar was designed for preachers who: (1) share the struggle with preaching the parables of Jesus in such a way that impacts their audiences with the same force that Jesus had upon his audiences and, (2) want to be better equipped in effectively preaching parables to a contemporary audience.

Each preacher attending the seminar was engaged in the process of identifying the function of parables, discovering the parable's points of reference for the original audience and presenting new points of reference to the entire group. The intent of the seminar was to support the critical need to both exegete and contemporize the parables in today's context.

Seminar Schedule

Hour One: What is a Parable?

During the first hour, the participants:

Learned the definition and function of the parable.

Discussed the function of a joke upon its listeners, drawing from an analogy by Fee and Stuart in, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 151-52.

Analyzed the two jokes that were told by two preachers to understand what Fee and Stuart presented.

Hour Two: What do we mean by Point of Reference?

During the second hour, the participants;

Learned how to find the parable's points of reference.

They explored three texts, (Luke 7:40-42, Luke 10:25-37, and Luke 15:11-32).

They used, Steps to Studying the Parables, page 32 in Chapter II., to:

Physically hear the parable, (The parables were originally spoken so the participants read them).

Identify the original audience, and

Discover what the original audience heard.

Hour Three: Preaching the Ancient Parable with Relevance

During the third hour, the participants:

Observed Fee and Stuarts' rendition of the Good Samaritan and my presentation of the Prodigal Son,

Experienced the process of translating the 1st Century Parable into 21st Context.

Each preacher was assigned to a group. After having 30 minutes with the parable, the three groups had the responsibility to share the following with the entire group:

The 1st Century parable's points of reference, and

The 21st Century possible new points of reference.

Seminar Goals

To understand the parabolic form and function of the parable;

To understand that discovering the parable's points of reference is pivotal to grasping its meaning and relevance;

To experience the process of translating the parable for the contemporary audience by creating new points of reference;

To review the advantages of preaching the parables expositionally;

To provide preachers with a method for retelling the parable in insightful, interesting, and inspiring ways.

Seminar Evaluation

At the conclusion of the seminar, the participants completed an evaluation.

I will share the cumulative response to each statement.

1. How did the seminar impact your understanding of preaching parables?

Response: The 34 preachers responded: Greatly.

2. Prior to the seminar, had you heard of "the parables points of reference?"

Response: The 34 preachers responded: No.

3. Do you now understand how to find the parable's point of reference?

Response: The 34 preachers responded: Yes.

4. On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest, rank the relevancy of the seminar.

Response: The 34 preachers responded: 10.

5. If there was a book that stated the steps for translating a parable without changing the timeless principle would you purchase it?

Response: The 34 preachers responded: Yes I would. Also, one of the survey questions was: Would you like to receive an electronic copy of my thesis-project (Making 1st Century Lukian Parables Relevant to a 21st Century Audience without

losing 1st Century Truths) when finished? All 64 preachers, (100%), would like a copy.

Resources for Further Study

Books

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James, Steven *Story: Recapture the Mystery*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Dear Classmates,

This is a quick survey to assist me in my D. Min. Thesis-Project. I am assessing the need to contemporize the 1st Century Parables for the 21st Century audience without losing the 1st Century truths among preachers. You are in my class and representing a broad based of pastors following Robinson's Big Idea preaching. Would you kindly answer the following questions and return the survey to me at your earliest convenience (or by Friday, November 2, 2007)? Thank you. May God bless your ministry!

Smitty

1. Of the following titles:

- a. This is the very first time I heard of the title.
- b. I saw the title somewhere and registered in my memory that I will look for the title when I come across that subject again.
- c. I have read the title.
- d. I understand the author's proposition and content.
- e. I have applied the process of contemporization the author's presented.

Please put a check mark in the appropriate column:

Titles, Papers and Articles	a	b	c	d	e
How to Preach a Parable (1990), Eugene L. Lowery					
Cotton Patch: Parables of Liberation (2001), C. Jordan & B. Doulas					
How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth (2003), G. Fee & D. Stuart					
Parables for Preaching (2000), B. Reid					
Preaching Parables to Postmoderns (2005), B. Stiller					
Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today (1982), J. Stott					
Preaching with Relevance (2001), K. Willhite					
Preaching the Parables by Robert Hughes. In the Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology (1991), Edited by John Reumann					
With Many Such Parables: The Imagination as a Means of Grace by Leland Ryken. In Developing A Christian Imagination (1995), Compiled by Warren Wiersbe					
Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide (2000), by David Buttrick					
Preaching the Parables (2004), by Craig Blomberg					
Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World (1998) by David Henderson					
Biblical Preaching (1980) by Haddon Robinson					
How to Talk So People Will Listen (1993) by Steve Brown					

2. Go back to the list above (Q #1). Please place an “O” on the column, you wish you had read (based on the title only).
3. For you, what is the most challenging aspect of preaching a parable today?
4. As a preacher, on average, you preach parables _____ times annually.
5. Would you like to receive an electronic copy of my thesis-project (*Making 1st Century Lukan Parables Relevant to a 21st Century Audience Without Losing 1st Century Truths*) when it is finished?
Yes _____ No _____
6. If finance and time are not your concerns and there is a one day seminary within 30 miles from your residence, would you attend this seminar: Re-Dressing 1st Century Parables in 21st Century Garb?
Yes _____ No _____
Maybe _____ (please explain)

APPENDIX B

SEMINAR AND POWER POINT PRESENTATION

**REDRESSING 1ST CENTURY
PARABLES IN
21ST CENTURY GARB**



Pastor Marvin T. Smith

Mount Olive Institutional Missionary Baptist Church

November 10, 2007

The Problem Statement

Preachers struggle with preaching the parables of Jesus in such a way that impacts their audiences with the same force that Jesus had upon His audiences.

The Purpose of the Seminar:

Haddon Robinson, author of Biblical Preaching, has said, “The Bible always says what it meant to say to the 1st century audience.” However, the 21st century audience may not always get what the Bible has said. For this reason, the 21st century preacher needs to be prepared to both explain and to contemporize the Parables.



The Outline of the Seminar

The seminar will flow in the following manner:

The first hour:

The seminar participants will learn the definition and function of the parable.

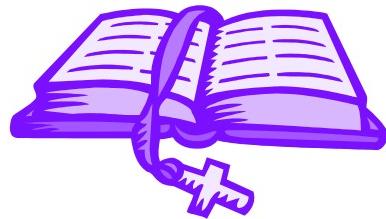
The second hour:

The seminar participants will be introduced to and shown how to find the parable's points of reference.

The third hour:

The seminar participants will be taught how to translate the parable into a 21st Century context so that the contemporary hearer can understand and apply the principle today.

Complete Evaluation Form Q & A

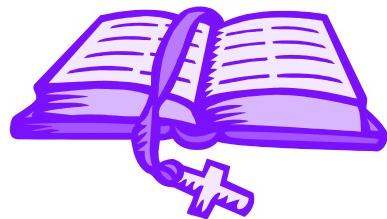


Introduction

The same two things that capture the hearer of a joke and elicit a response of laughter are the same two things that capture the hearers of Jesus' parables:

- ❖ Their knowledge of the points of reference

- ❖ Their recognition of the unexpected turn in the story



I. What is a parable?

“The parables of Jesus are a concrete/dramatic form of theological language that presses the listener to respond.” Kenneth Bailey, Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes

The best clues to what parables are is to be found in their function:

- ❖ A means of calling forth a response in some way to Jesus/God/Kingdom.

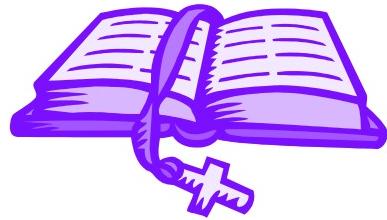


The keys to understanding the parable are the points of reference (POR).

POR – those various parts of the story with which one identifies at it is being told.

If one misses these then there can be no unexpected turn because the points of reference are what create the ordinary expectations.

If one misses these in a parable, then the force and the point of what Jesus said is likewise going to be missed.



II. What do we mean by POR?

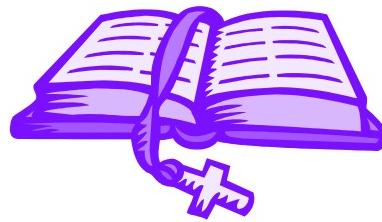
❖ Luke 7:40-42

There are three points of reference:

The money lender and the two debtors. God is like the money lender; the town prostitute and Simon are like the two debtors.

The point of the parable:

A word of judgment calling for response from Simon and his friends.



❖ Luke 10:25-37

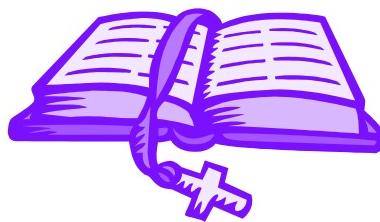
There are two points of reference:
The man in the ditch and the Samaritan.

The point of the parable:
The hatred in the heart of the lawyer.

❖ Luke 15:11-32

There are three points of reference:
The father and the two sons.

The point of the parable:
Those who consider themselves righteous reveal themselves to be unrighteous if they do not share the father's and the lost son's joy.



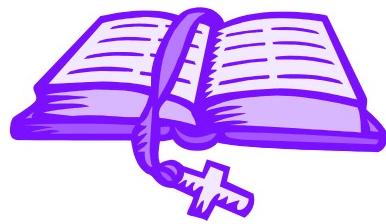
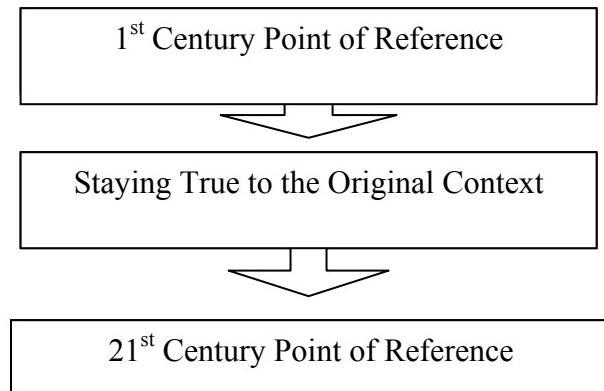
Finding the Points of Reference:

- ❖ Reading the parable repeatedly
- ❖ Identifying the original audience
- ❖ Discovering what the original audience heard

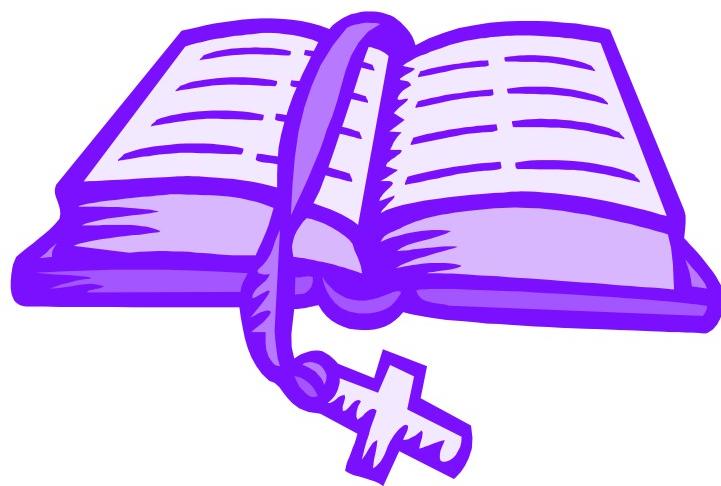


III. Preaching the Ancient Parable with Relevance

- ❖ Guidelines for Studying the Parables
- ❖ Translate the 1st Century Parables into 21st Century Context



QUESTIONS?



APPENDIX C

SEMINAR EVALUATION

“Redressing the 1st Century Parable in 21st Century Garb”
Mt. Olive IMBC
Pastor Marvin T. Smith, Facilitator
November 9, 2007

Please complete before leaving. Thanks.

How did the seminar impact your understanding of preaching parables? Check one.

Greatly Moderately Not at all

Prior to the seminar, had you heard of “the parable’s points of reference?” Check one.

Yes. If so, when? No

Do you now understand how to find the parable’s point of reference? Check one.

Yes No Need more training

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest, rank the relevancy of the seminar. Circle the number.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If there was a book that stated the steps for translating a parable without changing the timeless principle would you purchase it? Check one.

Yes I would. Strong Possibility Absolutely not

APPENDIX D

EXERCISES

Find the Parable's Point of Reference

1. The Parable of the Ten Virgins
Matthew 25:1-13
2. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet
Matthew 22:1-14
3. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
Matthew 1-16
4. The Parable of the Tenants
Mark 12:1-11
5. The Parable of the Friend in the Night
Luke 11:1-13
6. The Parable of the Rich Fool
Luke 12:13-21
7. The Parable of the Persistent Widow
Luke 18:1-8
8. The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector
Luke 18:9-14
9. The Parable of the Lost Son
Luke 15:11-32
10. The Parable of the Shrewd Manager
Luke 16:1-14

APPENDIX E

STEPS TO STUDYING THE PARABLES

In order to understand the parables of Jesus and to discern their message for today, the preacher needs to go through the following steps.

1. Identify the original audience. Is Jesus speaking to the Pharisees and scribes, to the multitudes, or to his disciples?
2. Compare where other Gospel writers locate the same parable and how they interpret it. For example, Luke (19:12-27) and Matthew (25:14-30) each locate the Parable of the Pounds or Talents in different sequences so as to create a different emphasis.
3. Examine the cultural setting of the parable. Great differences exist between the way people in the Western world do things and think and the way people in Palestine lived and thought.
4. Study the structure of the parable. This helps guide the reader in understanding the story itself.
5. Identify the points of reference. There are certain symbols that the original audience would have immediately identified in the story.
6. Determine what response the original audience is pressed to make after the parable is told.
7. Discern what the parable is saying about God and/or his kingdom.
8. Identify possible modern equivalents to the parable. What symbols of our day can serve as “new points of reference” so that today’s hearers can “get the timeless truth of the parable?”

APPENDIX F

LAYERS OF TRADITION



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VITA

Marvin T. Smith was born March 13, 1963 in the city of Shreveport, Louisiana, where he received all of his primary and secondary educational training. He attended Southern University and received both a Bachelor of Science Degree (1986) in Business Management and a commission into the United States Army as a Second Lieutenant.

Four years later, he acknowledged the call from God to prepare to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At that time, he enrolled at Vanderbilt's Divinity School as a full-time student and three years later obtained the Master of Theological Studies Degree (1993) with a concentration in Christian Ethics. A year later, he became the pastor of the Mt. Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee. In 1998, he moved to Saginaw, Michigan, to become the senior pastor of the Mt. Olive Institutional Missionary Baptist Church.

Rev. Smith began his doctoral residency in March 2004. He is graduating from "The Preacher and The Message" track and is mentored by Dr. Sid Buzzell and Dr. Haddon Robinson. He is expected to earn the Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary of South Hamilton, Massachusetts in May 2008. Rev. Smith's mission in ministry is to relentlessly preach the Word of God, in a manner which encourages people to make perpetual and radical commitments to the Kingdom's agenda. This thesis reflects his seventeen plus year interest in preaching parables.